



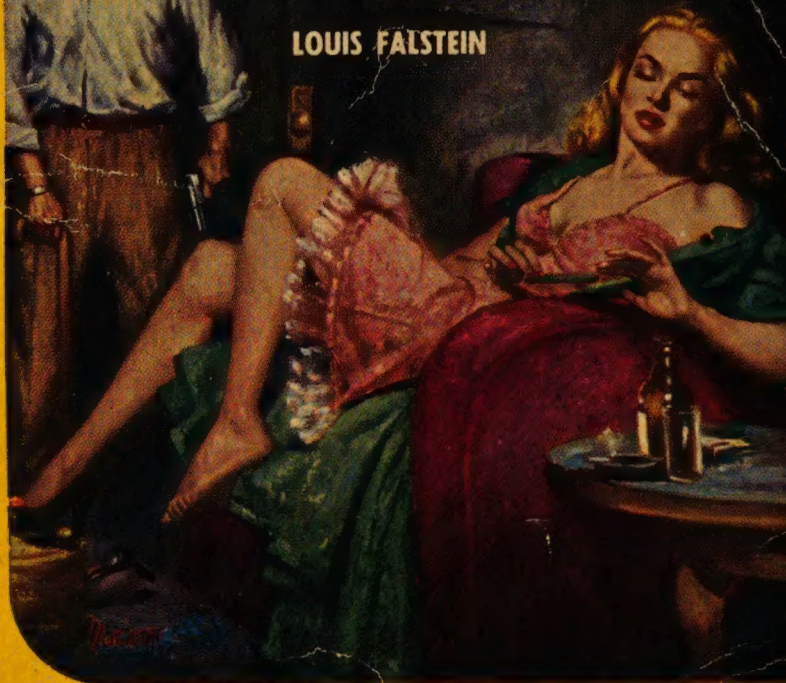
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A SAVAGE NOVEL OF CRIME AND LUST IN A BIG CITY

2/35

Slaughter Street

LOUIS FALSTEIN



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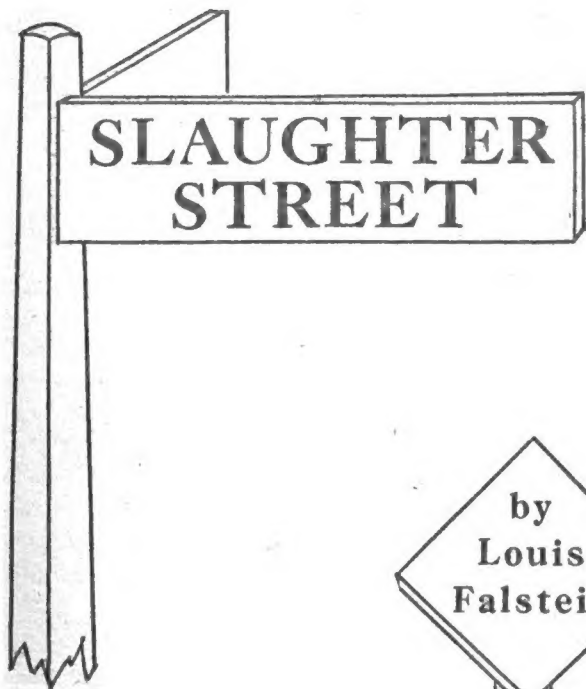
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SLAUGHTER STREET

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A LION BOOK



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CHAPTER ONE

OUTSIDE, HE STARTED RUNNING. His head was pounding, his knees trembling. He did not stop running until he had reached the police station. At the door he hesitated an instant and went in.

A police sergeant was leaning forward in his chair, cracking his knuckles disconcertingly on a glass-topped desk. Each crack sounded like a small explosion. A large fly was buzzing madly above the desk, deflected from its course by the blasts of an electric fan.

"You're looking for Hugo Minelli," the young man said without any preliminaries, hurling the words from his mouth as if he wanted to be rid of them in a hurry. "I know where he is."

The police officer ceased his knuckle-cracking and puckered his lips in surprise. "Personally I'm not looking for him," he said after a pause, "but the department is. And so are about forty states in the Union. Where is he?"

The young man, near the sergeant's desk, hesitated and shifted the weight of his body to his right foot. "According to the papers and the notices on the post-office walls," he said slowly, "the ten thousand reward goes for the *apprehension* and *arrest*. I want to be in on both. I'll take you there."

"It also says *information leading to*," the sergeant said, reaching for a pad of paper and pencil. Out of the corner

of his eye he caught sight of the fly. It had been pestering him all afternoon. Several times he had been on the point of squashing it with his palm, but each time it . . . He took a quick, angry swipe at it, missed and turned to the young man, a look of annoyance on his beet-red face.

"What's *your* name?"

"What's the difference?" the young man balked. "Constable," he said grudgingly, "Johnnie Constable."

The cop wrote it down slowly, examined his handwriting, as if trying to recall whether he had seen or heard the name before. Finally he picked up the receiver and held it close to his ear. The young man in front of him appeared nervous. The sergeant judged him to be in the middle or late twenties, almost six feet in height, a little on the slender side. A lock of black hair partially hid a knitted brow. The eyes, brown and intense, appeared to be bloodshot, but the face was smoothly shaven. He was dressed in a neatly pressed, blue summer-weight suit and wore a tie despite the oppressive heat. Looked like a college boy, maybe. The hands were large but white. The tip of a shoehorn stuck out of his coat pocket.

"There is a *paisan* here who says he knows where Minelli is hiding out," the cop said, nodding into the phone. He put down the receiver and turned to Johnnie: "Okay, *paisan*, there'll be somebody to go with you, in a couple of minutes. You sure now it's Minelli?"

"I'm sure," Johnnie said, resentment boiling up inside him. He didn't like the sergeant's sly grin; he didn't like the red face that looked like an overripe tomato; he had struck out at people more than once for calling him *paisan*.

"When did you see him?"

"Last time, this morning," Johnnie replied, "entering a house."

"Whose house?"

"A rooming house."

"And you sure it was Hugo Minelli?"

"Hey, what the hell is this?" Johnnie cried, turning crimson. "I've known Minelli since we were kids. If you want to have the facts, me and Minelli were raised in the same street. We ran around with the same kid-gangs . . . I could point to that goon in my sleep."

The sergeant, sitting back in his chair, considered the statement. He pressed on his index finger and there was a small explosion. "No point getting excited," he said, "too hot for that."

"I'm sure it's Minelli."

The sergeant nodded. Usually he had them figured the minute he laid eyes on them. But this one had him puzzled; this one appeared as if he had wandered in here by accident. "Got a grudge against Minelli?" he probed.

"Me and a million others," Johnnie Constable replied. He saw the cop leaning on his middle finger and waited for the next explosion.

"What's *your* grudge?" He waited for an answer, but all he heard was the droning of the electric fan. "Okay," he said, altering his course, "I'll stick to the pertinent information. Where do you live?"

"Why is that important?"

"Ain't you interested in the reward?" the sergeant asked slyly.

"Parsons Street, 11 Parsons," Constable replied. He wondered when they would appear, the men who were to go with him.

"The Block, eh?" the sergeant said, writing down the address. "Garden Spot of the City! All the *paisans* in The Block will have themselves a merry time when they hear

Minelli's been pinched. Might even make you mayor of Little Italy. . . . Where you work?"

"No work. I was fired today."

"Everything happens today, eh?" the cop said, amused. It had started out a sleepy, humdrum afternoon, but now he was coming wide awake. "How come you were fired?"

"What's that got to do with Minelli?" Johnnie retorted angrily.

"You and me are going to have a lot of business together," the sergeant replied in a calm tone of voice. "I like to know with whom I'm dealing."

"Well, if you have to know," the other relented, "I got a bum knee. A German mine—in the war. Can't stand on the knee any length of time. This job I had—"

"A shoe salesman," the cop said, a pleased look on his face.

"How did you know?"

"The shoehorn sticking out of your pocket."

"Then why did you ask?"

"It's my business," the sergeant replied, a slight grin taking brief refuge in the corners of his mouth.

"Anything else you want to know?"

"Yeah. If you got a bum knee, how come you're a shoe salesman?"

"You take what you get," Johnnie replied. "With *my* knee you can't be independent." Suddenly he bent down and started pulling up his left trouser leg.

"What's that for?" the sergeant asked, startled. But he rose and walked around the desk.

"Exhibit A!" Johnnie cried.

"I believe you."

"The hell you do! You want facts? I'm giving you facts!"

"Well—I'll be!" the sergeant exclaimed, staring in

amazement at the polished knee cap. "Silver." There was an inscription on the metal cap:

From the neighbors in The Block
to Johnnie Constable for his
services to his country in World
War Two.

"What else you want to know?"

"That'll be all for now," the sergeant said, watching Constable roll down the pants leg. He saw the trembling hands and the red flush on the cheeks.

"If that's all," Johnnie said, straightening up, "where are those dicks that are supposed to go with me?"

"They'll be out soon," the sergeant said, resuming his seat. He picked up a pencil and looked at it reflectively. He still didn't have the fellow figured, but one angle could be dismissed: he wasn't doing it for the reward alone, not the type. A feeling, strange to him, took hold of the sergeant. "I wouldn't be in such a hurry," he said, maintaining his gaze on the pencil.

"What do you mean?"

"Minelli, I mean. He's a tough customer. Awfully tough. If you know all about him, like you say you do, then maybe you heard he's broken out of jail three times. He's an awful tough cookie. And he carries a grudge."

"'Preciate your information," Johnnie said, "only it sounds strange coming from the *law*."

"Take it or leave it," the sergeant said. He looked at his fingers as if trying to recall which one of them needed cracking. The pesky fly was creeping toward the center of the desk again. This time he meant to get it, for sure.

A side door opened and two plain-clothes men came in.

One of them was a burly six-footer with a long face and a pronounced tic in his right eye. The other one was small, stocky, with prominent sideburns. The tall one threw Johnnie a suspicious look; the other detective ignored him completely. They spoke to the sergeant almost in whispers and motioned to Johnnie who followed them. In the car, racing along the streets, they hardly took notice of him. Their hostility puzzled him and he thought: "You can both go to hell! Soon I'll have you up Aunt Mabel's!"

"Where'd you say the place was?"

Johnnie, sitting in the back seat alone, was startled by this break in the silence. "Six twenty nine Washington Street," he replied.

"When did you see him?" The question, like the previous one, came from the short one at the wheel. He asked the questions without turning.

"This morning, before lunch," Johnnie said, watching the driver maneuver past a red light.

"How do you know he's still there?"

The question puzzled him. He detected a note of grievance in the man's voice. What the hell was this? Were they interested in getting their hands on Minelli, or weren't they? "I don't know," he finally replied, addressing his words at their backs. "I only know he's been there for three days."

Now the tall one with the tic in his eye turned and looked at Johnnie. "Three days?"

"That's when I saw Minelli first, three days ago, on the Bush Avenue bus, going downtown." He had recognized Minelli as soon as he saw him, wearing a hat but no disguise. Wasn't like Hugo to wear a disguise, although his picture had been plastered all over the front pages of the papers for several days running. Hugo, who had sat down

across the aisle, had smiled at him, though Johnnie doubted that he recognized him; they hadn't spoken to each other in ten years or more.

The right eye of the detective ticked at him like a time bomb. "Why didn't you turn him in?"

"Because I wasn't mad enough," he retorted. "I wasn't mad enough."

"When was the next time you saw him?"

"Two days ago, on the street," Johnnie said, glaring at the ticking eye. He had just emerged on the street, after punching his time card. And there was Minelli again, walking at a leisurely pace across the street, a new portable radio under his arm. "I followed him to the rooming house," Johnnie said.

"And the third time?"

"This morning, like I said."

The two detectives exchanged meaningful glances. The tall one pivoted in his seat again. "Looks like you and Minelli just kept bumping into each other."

"That's what it looks like," Johnnie agreed, wondering where all this was leading.

"But it took you a hell of a long time to turn him in. Minelli a pal of yours?"

"I answered all the questions at the station house."

"But you didn't answer what took you so long to turn him in," the detective persisted.

"Maybe that's none of your business!" Johnnie cried, doubling his fists. The car swerved sharply to the right. Crowds were milling on both sides of the avenue. The asphalt felt soft under their humming tires. The sun reflected a fiery red in their windshield. He sat on the edge of the seat, poised, waiting for more questions. What the hell did they want of him? The past three days had been

like a nightmare. They had driven him almost insane. When he wasn't seeing Minelli, he was constantly surrounded by talk about Minelli. In The Block, Minelli had been the only topic of conversation. Everybody was out to get Minelli whose name stank in the nostrils of the Italian community. *Madonna*, the crook! During the war, Minelli had robbed them, shaken them down, burned the establishments of those who had refused to be shaken down.

"A black mark on all of us," his father had said about Minelli. The indignant talk had raged about him like a forest fire. And he had listened, saying nothing. Johnnie leaned back and lit a cigarette. Even now he wasn't sure when his mind had finally been made up to turn in Minelli. It was all a jumble now, the talk in the neighborhood, Peggy's revelation when they were making love the other night that she meant to have an abortion, it was the only way out . . . and the final blow, when Gilder fired him this morning.

The car came to a screeching stop in front of 629 Washington Street and the two detectives transferred the guns from their shoulder holsters to their coat pockets. All three of them left the car and mounted the stairs. The landlady opened the door in response to their ringing. Like most proprietresses of rooming houses, she had a sallow complexion and a suspicious look.

"I'm full up," she said.

The burly one flashed his badge and ordered her to show them to Minelli's room.

"I got nobody by name of Minelli," she said defensively.

"What about Baker?"

"No Baker either. I got a respectable clientele here, business people."

"What about Loud-Socks O'Toole?" the detective continued, reciting Minelli's aliases.

"Like I said," she maintained sullenly, "I got only respectable—"

"Look, sister!" the burly one said menacingly, pushing her out of the way, "if we find him here, you'll get the book thrown at you."

She started to say something, changed her mind, then motioned to them to follow her. "I don't know what that one is called," she said in a whisper, leading them along a dark foyer to the end of the hall. "Look for yourselves."

Johnnie watched the detectives examine the door and heard a canned female voice issuing from a radio, recognizing one of the soap operas. Nearby, a runaway toilet sounded like a waterfall. Someone was coming down the creaking stairs. The burly one knocked, turned the knob with his left hand, holding the gun in his right. He lunged into the room as the door gave, followed by his associate.

Johnnie caught sight of Minelli sitting with his feet propped on a table. He wore yellow socks with red dots on them. Minelli scampered to his feet almost upsetting the chair. His quick eyes darted about the room as if he were looking for some object. Realizing that the gun was nowhere within his reach, he raised his arms, his eyes dipping down to his socks as if he had been caught without any clothes on.

Johnnie remained on the threshold of the room, watching with fascination while the arrest was being made. It was all done quickly, without any flourish, hardly any words being spoken, as if they had rehearsed the whole thing in advance. Hugo put on his shoes deliberately, his face resuming the icy calmness that was now familiar to millions of newspaper readers. Their eyes met in a brief

instant of recognition. Then Hugo spat contemptuously in his direction and turned away.

"Sonofabitch!" Johnnie muttered.

The prisoner, manacled, was led down the stairs and nudged into the car. The burly detective was about to get in, but then, as if remembering Johnnie's presence, he said: "Okay, mac, we'll take care of this from here on in. You done your good deed, now beat it."

"I'll go back to the station with you," Johnnie said in a low, tense voice. He was ashamed of being overheard by Minelli.

"We don't need you at the station, mac. We'll call you when we need you."

"*Call* me?" Johnnie said, incensed. "Don't try giving me the brushoff. I'm going—"

"What's the matter with you, mac?" the burly one said, eyeing Johnnie with naked hostility.

He was suddenly overwhelmed by an explosive anger. His hands were knotted into fists. He felt he had to smash this man, smash someone. First it had been the sergeant at the station house who taunted him with the word *paisan*, then Minelli who had spat at him, and now the flatfoot handing him the soft-soap.

"Don't give me this *good deed* business!"

The two men stood glaring at each other, then the detective wavered. "If you wanna come to the station house," he said, smiling almost imperceptibly, "it's okay with me."

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY IN THE EVENING, the Parsons Street section known as The Block, wore its usual gay face. Lights spilled out of the white, two-story houses onto the porches hemmed in by thin iron railings and the green patches fronting the homes. It had turned somewhat cooler, but the neighbors were out on the sidewalk, talking, laughing, filling the evening air with warm, friendly, secretive noises. Someone was playing "Come Back To Sorrento" on an accordion and down in the street a falsetto tenor had trouble accompanying the instrumentalist. Four men in shirt sleeves sat on bridge chairs in the middle of the sidewalk, playing cards by the light of a lantern. Several women were having a friendly argument in furious *Sicilliano*: a baby was shrieking loudly. Near the sign: Keep Our Block The Garden Spot of the City, and across the street of the Constable home, lights were shimmering like a string of pearls on the circling merry-go-round. The calliope was flexing its iron lungs, grinding out a never-changing Sousa march. A group of men were shooting clay ducks at the gallery. The Paradise Bar was crowded.

Mike Fortugno, the young barber and father of two, was the first to hear the news flash of Minelli's arrest. He ran past his wife dozing in the living room and emerged on the porch in his shirt sleeves. "They got Minelli!" he cried.

The card players flung away their cards, the singing had stopped. Small, compact circles formed all over the street. People were shaking hands, congratulating one another; some, like Mike Fortugno whose barber shop had once been sprayed with gasoline and burned by Minelli, were delirious with joy. Dominic Sciortino, the bricklayer, was passing out Toscanelli cigars. Minelli was behind bars and now they could breathe easier. There would be no more cops and plain-clothes men moving like shadows through The Block and Little Italy nearby, fingering every male, mistaking him for Hugo Minelli . . . Now there would be peace. Most of the people, particularly the old timers, knew Minelli, knew him way back as a child, followed his sordid career through reformatories, robberies, jailbreaks. They despised Hugo and everything he stood for. He was a black mark against the Italian community, he and a host of others. Only he was worse. In addition to shame, he brought misery upon them, turning on his own people, his neighbors, looting and robbing them. For a while Hugo had dropped out of sight and they had almost forgotten about him. But last week he appeared again, after robbing a bank in the South. *Basta!* Now it was over.

"I wonder," said Mike Fortugno, "who turned him in."

"Didn't the radio say?"

"No, it didn't say."

"Well, whoever it was, God bless him."

Peggy Browne stood in front of the mirror brushing her sandy-colored hair vigorously when she heard the news flash of Minelli's arrest. She dropped the brush as if it had stung her fingers and stared anxiously at the portable radio near her studio-bed which was made up for the night. She waited for more. But there was no more. She found it

strange that Johnnie's name was not mentioned. Why didn't they mention Johnnie's name? She picked up the brush from the floor and put it on the dresser. Something must have gone wrong. Someone else must have turned in Minelli. She felt a cold sweat bathing her body. There went the ten thousand reward! And they were counting on the money. The reward, like a godsend, was to solve all the crushing problems that had moved in on them all at once. A couple of damn fools, she reflected, counting on pie-in-sky money. "And me especially," she thought, remembering last evening when he had told her about Minelli and she had urged him to do it; they needed the money, needed it desperately; she didn't know how much longer she could go on working at that noisy punch-press, her belly getting larger all the time. She had flung the word *abortion* at him and he had said there wasn't any sense in putting it off, they would get married. "On what?" she had wanted to know. And he had said, would ten thousand do for a start? Ten thousand. *Somebody* would get that ten thousand. "It might just as well be us," she had said. They would get set up for themselves, not live with his old folks, get an apartment of their own, been talking about it for almost a year . . . and there would be enough to spare for something he had been dreaming about ever since he got out of the service: buy a piece of the merry-go-round across the street from the house; easy work for a guy with a trick knee; just pull a lever and watch them spin, listen to the music and the laughter. "It's an ideal kind of business," he had said. "You sit back, listen to the music and people laughing—and take in a sound buck in the bargain." But even after they had agreed, she had seen the doubt in his face, had felt it in the way he had kissed her goodnight.

"Will you do it, Johnnie?" she had asked.

"What else is there?"

She remembered now the tormented look he gave her. Should have told him right there and then (it broke your heart to look at him) to forget the whole thing, not to do it. The whole get-rich-quick scheme was a house built on quicksand. They would get along somehow, others did. Instead, she had watched him disappear down the dark street, walking stiff-legged, remembering even in his torment to hide from the world the limpness of his left foot.

Peggy flicked off the radio, tightened the belt of her flowered kimono, buttoned the collar over her throat and went down the creaking rooming-house stairs. The telephone was in the foyer, hanging on the wall. She inserted a coin, heard the click, dialed. At the other end of the wire a female voice answered: Johnnie's mother. They had never met, but Peggy knew the voice well, the cold, impersonal voice and the thick Italian accent. For a year now she heard it on and off, never more than a few words pressed through the wire, but even in those words she thought she detected hostility.

"Is Johnnie home?"

"No, not home."

"This is Peggy."

"Yeah, I know."

"When do you expect him?"

"I don't know myself. I—" The voice broke off. Peggy waited for more, sensing in this pause the incomplete sentence, a desire to share.

"Please tell him I called, will you, Mrs. Constable?"

"I tell him."

Peggy returned to her room and closed the door. Her heart was beating violently. She flicked on the radio again. Maybe there would be more news. A band was playing the

rhumba, filling the room with its brazen staccato rhythm. It was past ten. Where was her Johnnie? Why didn't he call? She turned to dial to another station. Maybe Johnnie wasn't in this thing at all. Maybe the cops arrested Minelli. If Johnnie had been involved, they would have mentioned his name. "God!" she cried, "I hope he wasn't in it!"

The clock on the wall of the crowded Constable living room rang twelve times. In the dining room, near the mahogany table piled high with supper dishes, Mama Constable dozed in a chair, her huge, shapeless body frozen into immobility. Sleep softened the peasant coarseness of her face, but even sleep could not erase the mold of deep tragedy. Near her, on the table, were several round little balls she had kneaded with her fingers out of a slice of white bread. Tonight she had kneaded more than usual; tonight her Johnnie was later than usual.

The door opened but she did not hear it. Her husband came in, a newspaper under the crook of his arm. He was a tall, spare man in his early sixties, with a slightly hooked nose, bony face, prominent cheekbones and lively, though small, eyes. In The Block they referred to Armando Constable as a "retired" bricklayer, though he wasn't that at all. He meant to show them one of these days, go back to laying bricks, soon as his spine felt better. In the meantime he spent his days watching *borce* games at the playground and reading newspapers, both Italian and English. When he finished reading a page, he tore it off and folded it. At the end of an evening there was a high neat stack on the table. Before going to bed, he always examined the fig tree in his back yard.

"Mariannina!"

She woke with a start and opened her eyes. "What is it?"

"They caught Minelli!" the old man exclaimed, flashing a newspaper.

"Caught who?"

"Hugo Minelli."

She shrugged and rose with difficulty, holding on with her hands to the sides of the chair. "What's all this fuss about Minelli? In the past few days that's all—"

"Here, read it," the old man interrupted, pointing a finger at the picture of Minelli on the front page.

She pushed away the paper. "It does not interest me," she said.

"But, Mariannina—"

"What makes you so happy?" she wanted to know.

"There is justice after all," he retorted, ignoring her question. "For a while I was afraid that the police weren't interested in Minelli. The papers were full of him, everybody knew he was in the city, but nobody did anything about it. Now I admit I was wrong."

She stacked the dishes to take them to the kitchen. "I feel sorry for Hugo's mother," she said.

"The mother is no better than the son," he shot back. "I knew her in Lecce. Believe me, she was no better than the son."

"I feel sorry for her anyway. Hugo is an only son."

"*Woman!*" he said bitingly. "You don't understand."

"I understand this," she retorted. "You are an old fool who warms himself when somebody else's house is on fire."

She left him in the dining room and started carrying the dishes to the kitchen. There was a mountain of dishes, she observed, in spite of the fact that only two had eaten supper. But somehow she could not bring herself, even now, to deny the table what she considered its due. She always set the table for four, although the fourth one, Alfredo,

was dead, having been killed in the Battle of the Bulge. Three places would be enough, no, two, because Johnnie was hardly ever at home, running around with this Protestant girl he had met at the veterans' hospital a year ago when his shattered knee suddenly collapsed. She put the dishes in the sink and turned on the water. "Where's Johnnie?" she worried.

"Listen to this, Mariannina," her husband said, following her into the kitchen. "It says here: 'Detectives Richard Maloney and Oscar Berlenbach had been on Minelli's trail for three days before finally making the arrest.'"

"Why didn't they arrest him the first time they saw him?" she asked, stirring the soapy water. "Was a formal introduction necessary?"

"The law in this country has its own strange ways of doing things," he explained patiently. "Now the two detectives are going to get the ten thousand dollar reward. Shall I read it to you?"

"I believe you."

He shook his head approvingly. "Five thousand dollars apiece. And they deserve it, too."

"They can have it. I don't want it."

"Have no fear, you won't get it. According to the paper, the detectives have already put in a claim for it."

"Well—" she sighed, "maybe we are finished with this Minelli affair."

They were still in the kitchen, working at the dishes, when Johnnie came in. His face was haggard and there were deep shadows under his eyes. He was clutching at several newspapers on whose front pages were pictures of Minelli and the two detectives who were claiming the reward.

"Where were you?" Mrs. Constable asked, watching with concern the tight lines around his mouth.

He glared at her and threw the newspapers on the kitchen table.

"I see you read the news," the old man said, glancing at the pile of papers.

"I read," Johnnie articulated slowly. His head throbbed and he felt he would collapse from exhaustion if they did not leave him alone, if they did not get out of his way and let him sit down.

"What do you think? Good, eh?"

Johnnie heard his own voice disembodied and detached, floating upon the room: "It's great . . . it's great."

"What's the matter?" the old man said, alarmed, noting the painful grimace on Johnnie's face.

"Nothing."

"*Something* is!" the old man insisted.

A blinding rage fired his blood. He smashed his fist on the table, upsetting a wine glass, the red liquid spattering the linoleum on the floor. "It was me that found Minelli! It was me that led the dicks to where Minelli was! The ten thousand belongs to me! I turned Minelli in! You understand!" His voice was shrill and loud, but his eyes beseeched them to hear his plea. The papers were not telling the truth; the papers too had been hoodwinked. They were all conspiring. "They're trying to screw me out of the money," he cried bitterly, his face contorted with pain. "I knew something was fishy when the two dicks tried giving me the brushoff. But I went along to the station house to put in my claim. They said to beat it or they'd lock me up for disturbing the peace. I lost my head and punched one of 'em. They tossed me out . . ." He paused momentarily, licked his dry lips: "I went to the papers and told

'em the story. I just come from there now . . .” He shook his head as if trying to awaken his faltering memory. “We’ll see who gets the ten thousand! Just watch the papers tomorrow morning . . .”

The two old people stared at each other for a long time without uttering a word. It appeared as if they were listening to the silence, expecting it to supply the appropriate words. Then she raised her powerful hands and wrung them, her gaze directed at the ceiling as if there lay the explanation for the calamity that had befallen her. “Why did he do it?” she thought. “What made him do it?”

CHAPTER THREE

OLD ARMANDO CONSTABLE was up much earlier than the rest. He left the house and went to the kiosk, near the bus stop. He took out his change wallet, a relic from Italy, and bought several newspapers. He was disappointed when only one of them, the *Star-Tribune*, carried the story. Johnnie's picture was splashed across the front page. "*Madonna!*" the old man muttered. It was a surprisingly good likeness of his son, though he would have preferred it if Johnnie had not grinned. Why did Americans always show their teeth in pictures as if they were in the dentist's chair? A sober pose, he reflected, would have been more in keeping with the importance of the occasion. Underneath the photo was his son's name: John Constable. Twice before he had seen the name Constable in the papers, once when Johnnie received the Purple Heart in Italy as a result of his wound, then when Alfredo was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. He sighed, remembering the melancholy occasions, and noted how much space was being devoted to his son. His old eyes caressed the name—Constable. Many years ago his name had been Constabule. He had dropped the letter *u* and at once the name sounded more "American." Now he felt as if his name had never been anything but Constable. The name in the paper lifted him out of a bottomless anonymity and it occurred to him that it would

be on a million envious lips before the day ran half its course.

He leaned against the kiosk and started reading the story. Then, realizing he must share it with his wife, Armando started rapidly for home. And yet, he couldn't help cheating. He was puzzled by the word *scoop*, but had no trouble with the story.

In an exclusive interview last night, John Constable, ex-combat infantryman, holder of the Purple Heart and Presidential Citation, claimed that he had led Detectives Maloney and Berlenbach to Hugo Minelli's hideout, and therefore deserved the ten thousand dollar reward . . .

The old man nodded approvingly and read on. Johnnie was quoted as saying that he knew Minelli since childhood days in Little Italy, had gone to school with him; how he followed Minelli to the Washington Street rooming house, and how he finally went to the police. At the bottom of the page, in small type, there was a statement by Police Commissioner O'Reilly who promised to "study the matter and do the fair and just thing as regards the reward money."

"Fair and just," the old man muttered angrily. They weren't putting anything over on his Johnnie; he'd have The Block and the societies up in arms. He went upstairs and heard his wife stirring in the kitchen. Johnnie's bedroom door, he noted, was still closed.

"Here it is," the old man said.

She took a cursory look at Johnnie's photograph. They had taken it last night at the newspaper office. Beneath the grin she saw the eyes, frightened and bewildered, ask-

ing the eternal question of all those who are in trouble: what am *I* doing here?

"Now read the story," he said.

"I know the story," she replied, returning to the gas range. "The story is trouble." She had hoped that the Minelli affair was over. But it wasn't. It appeared to her as if it had just started.

They listened to the clock ring eight times. "I'll go wake Johnnie," the old man said.

"Leave him alone."

"He'll want to read about this."

"There is time for it . . . plenty of time. Let him sleep."

"But the police commissioner's statement," the old man pleaded, "the one about the reward. Johnnie will be pleased to know."

"Let them have their money," she said, staring past her husband as if she were addressing some unseen power that sat in judgment of her son's conscience. "Johnnie doesn't want it—"

"Mariannina!" the old man cried, bewildered. "Have you gone crazy?"

She turned slowly toward her husband as if noticing him for the first time. "Do you want the money?" she demanded.

"It's not a question of wanting. The money has been offered and Johnnie deserves it."

"I'd rather see them burn the money," she said.

Later in the morning neighbors started dropping in: the whole Mollinari family from downstairs, the Fortugnos, the Narduccis with their two unmarried daughters—one of whom Mrs. Constable wanted for her Johnnie; Father D'Uva, the parish priest, the Rossini family, the widow

Mangana, Johnnie's friends Cosmo Bari and Larry Dante. They had come to congratulate Johnnie and shake his hand, but he slept the sleep of the dead.

"We're all grateful to your Johnnie," Mike Fortugno said to Mrs. Constable. "He performed a service to the community."

"I'm glad you think so," she said. She listened to them and nodded absently.

She watched her husband accepting congratulations, beaming upon his guests, fussing over them, moving about the crowded apartment with surprising agility, as if he were no longer an invalid. She could not understand the occasion for congratulations. She was not proud of what her son had done. She did not judge him, she never judged, leaving that to a higher power. But if she had known, if she had even remotely suspected that he was thinking of turning in Minelli, she would have stopped him. Nothing that he had said in the past few days had given her the slightest inkling of what was on his mind. She remembered now how they had talked, sitting at the table, about Minelli's latest bank robbery, about his picture in the papers and about the hatred of the Italian community for the gunman. It was in fact Armando who had thundered against Minelli, not Johnnie, citing a long list of grievances. "I would turn him in myself," he had said, "if I knew where he was." Johnnie, she remembered distinctly, had not said a word. Then what made him do it? "I should have known anyway," she berated herself. All her life she had protected the older one, Alfredo, who had been frail, leaving Johnnie to fight his own campaigns. She had let them take Alfredo, the one time she had let him out of her sight, and they killed him. Even now she often chastised herself; they would not have killed him if she had not let him out of

her sight. But Johnnie—he had been right near her. She should have suspected what was hatching in his mind. "Someplace I did wrong," she thought, looking stealthily at the door of the room where he slept. The least she could do now was to keep the well-wishers away from his door.

"You'll be kind enough," she said, "to let him sleep a little while longer. He needs it."

The telephone rang and she recognized Peggy's voice. She promised to have Johnnie call back when he got up. The neighbors left and others came. There were even some callers from Little Italy where Johnnie had first seen the light of this world. Before noon several reporters came trooping up the stairs, followed by a pack of photographers waving their cameras menacingly as if they meant to shoot everything in sight. Mrs. Constable, cowed by their numbers and their clamor, retreated to Johnnie's door. Then she heard him stir and he came out in his shorts, the silver cap gleaming on his left knee. His hair was mussed and his eyes bloodshot. It dawned on him slowly who these men were, and he grinned. He appeared eager and ready to have his picture taken even in his half sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

JOHNNIE PARKED HIS CAR, an old but peppery Chevy his father had given him when he got out of the service, several blocks from city hall. It was almost four in the afternoon and the downtown section, particularly near the Superior Department Store, was jammed with shoppers. He walked to the corner of Bush and Leland and waited. Where was she? The marriage license bureau would close at four-thirty. Then he caught sight of her as she elbowed her way through the crowd, waving frantically at him as if she were afraid he might run away.

"There you are. Oh—" Peggy reached out for him, smiling brightly, then suddenly turning away to hide her sobs. "Johnnie, oh, Johnnie—"

"What's that for?"

"I thought I'd never hear from you. What a terrible night!" She regarded him through quivering tears, seeking an answer to all the tormenting questions on her mind. She had read the papers; it seemed to her they were back where they had started.

"We better get going," he said.

"That," she said, casting a glance in the direction of city hall, "will wait. I have to know."

"Know what?" he asked, puzzled.

"What happened . . . Where we stand—"

"The reward, you mean?"

"The reward, *everything*."

"Does it have to be now?" It was late and there were people all around them, jostling, pushing and eyeing them curiously.

"Why *not* now?" There was a note of grievance in her voice.

"There isn't much to tell," he said. "I stopped at the police station this afternoon and talked to some bigshot. He said they're studying the matter. *Studying*—get it? You see, the two dicks have put in for the reward too."

"I know," she said thoughtfully. "Maybe we need a lawyer. They understand such things."

He shook his head. He saw no point in hooking up with a lawyer. There were enough vultures now picking at the substance of the reward. "The papers are on our side," he said, taking her arm and steering her gently away from the curb, "and I think public opinion is too."

They plunged into the crowd. They were almost running. She wore high-heeled shoes, a tight black skirt almost bursting at the thighs and a low-neck white blouse. She was tall, her body fully ripe except for the small breasts. There were dark shadows under her grey lustrous eyes, and the whimsical smile he loved so well (that's what had attracted him at their first meeting) was gone. Today, he observed, Peggy looked her age; she was twenty-three. He cast a sidelong glance at her belly and he appeared surprised at its smooth slimness; he had expected to see a swelling there.

They passed a newspaper stand and Johnnie was astounded to see his own image staring back at him. It gave him the uneasy feeling of being naked in the streets. He had the distinct impression that people were looking

at him, their eyes boring through him. Should have worn dark glasses, he thought, and a hat with a low brim.

They turned to the left and came abreast the Superior Department Store whose windows were covered with large, flaming signs proclaiming Economy Week. "My alma mater," he was on the point of saying to Peggy. A year wasted in the hole of a bargain basement, hustling with the shoes. "Madame, would you like to model this number?" He could almost hear Gilder's rasping voice driving the perspiring salesmen . . . Numbers on a time card. *How come you got no book today, Constable? You sick or something? Why do you keep staring at that phone booth? You expect an important call?*

"Let's go," he whispered to Peggy. He wanted to get away from there. The basement was still too vivid a thing in his mind, not the mountains of shoes, not the clamoring shoppers, but the phone booth in the middle of the store. For two days he had stared at the booth, magnetized by it, drawn toward it; call the police, call the police . . . tell them about Minelli and get the damned thing over with. A nightmare of a game . . . And then the final day, yesterday, his mind far from made up, although he had promised Peggy the previous evening that he would do it, yesterday the customer waving a tabloid at him with Minelli's picture on the front page, shouting accusingly: "They ought to deport all the dagos—the dirty hoodlums." Then the momentary blinding rage and his fist, striking out of its own volition, exploding in the customer's face and Gilder screaming: "You're fired, Constable. Get out!"

"By the way," he said, gripping Peggy's arm as they crossed the street, "among other things—I'm out of a job."

"Then we *are* back where we started," she said, fitting his words to what was on her mind.

"Almost," he agreed, "but not quite."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes expecting to hear more. But he turned away, squinted from the sun and stared ahead. His face was lined and his body, usually erect, appeared heavy with fatigue.

"Johnnie, I'm sorry—"

"Sorry about what?" he asked surprised.

"We could have waited another day with this marriage license."

"Why wait?"

"But you can hardly stand on your feet!" she cried desperately. "Let's put it off . . . for another day."

"Peg! What's the matter with you?"

She shook her head violently and again there were tears in her eyes. "Nothing . . . Nothing—" This is not the way she had pictured it, their trip to the marriage license bureau. She had seen it as a thing with flowers and laughter: an orchid for the prospective groom and a corsage for the bride-to-be. Three weeks after they had met at the veteran's hospital when she had said to him, I'm going to marry you someday, that is the way she had pictured it. She had done the proposing—she had realized even then that he was the type that required nudging—and had told him how they would do it with flowers and with laughter. And, dammit, it would have been that way if she hadn't got caught and become pregnant—her fault, too—and, finally, and this was most important, if she hadn't urged him to turn in Minelli. The devil take the reward money! What good was it? Her Johnnie was a ghost! My fault, she thought, my fault . . . She caught sight of the huge, cold, grey structure: the bureau. She smiled: "Let's go in and tell the man our troubles."

CHAPTER FIVE

ENTERING THE CONSTABLE APARTMENT, Peggy noted that the large table in the dining room had been set for five. Johnnie's parents were already dressed, although he had called them no more than an hour ago from a booth in city hall, telling them he was bringing her to meet them. His father wore a starched white shirt and a black tie. His mother wore a black dress under a grey smock. She came to the door and shook Peggy's hand. The women regarded each other for a long time. Finally Peggy's face broke into a smile but Mrs. Constable retained her tragic mask. "I'm glad to meet you," she said. "Supper will be ready soon." She turned abruptly and went to the kitchen, and the old man followed behind her.

In the living room where Johnnie motioned her to a chair, Peggy asked in a whisper: "Why is the table set for five? Do you expect someone else?"

"The fifth place is for my brother, Al," he replied, stretching out his left foot.

"But Al's dead—"

Johnnie nodded. "Only my mother acts as if he's alive."

"Oh—" She was sorry she had let him talk her into coming here tonight. This, at least, might have been postponed. Her idea had been better, but he wouldn't listen. She had wanted both of them to go to her room where she might hold, fondle and in the end cradle him while he

slept; she had wanted to drive the fatigue from his body, to make him forget briefly the bitter taste of the past twenty-four hours and to restore, if possible, what had been theirs before Minelli had come between them. But he had insisted: "I want you to meet them. I want to tell them. We aren't going to put it off." He seemed in a frenzy of a hurry, as if the momentum unloosed yesterday was carrying him along and he was unable or unwilling to call a halt. He was doing the right thing by his Nellie, she did not question that. But she suspected that beneath it all was a deep resentment; it appeared to her he was determined to do the *right* thing even if it killed him.

"How do you like the joint? A tomb, eh?"

"It's nice," she said, startled by his words. She wondered whether the feeling of guilt that was on her mind showed on her face. His smile reassured her.

"What are you staring at?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said evasively. "I was just trying to fit you into this room." She laughed and showed her strong white teeth.

"How are you making out?"

"I don't know." The room was crowded with massive furniture, satin cushions, antimacassars, artificial flowers: red-and-yellow roses on black stems. The walls were covered with portraits of the family; his brother, Al, wearing glasses, a ludicrous sight in his army uniform. How shocked the family had been when they learned that Al had been converted into a combat infantryman. Next to Al's there was another portrait of a soldier: his father, wearing the uniform of an Italian carabinieri, a rifle slung over his shoulder. A prize possession. And then there were portraits taken in Italy of grim-looking men with menacing whiskers seated stiffly in chairs, their large-bosomed women

standing respectfully to the rear, holding one hand lightly on the shoulder of the master and provider as if they feared arousing his wrath or that of the photographer. Preserved by the thick glass and heavy frames, the ancestors maintained a round-the-clock vigil over the furniture-bulging, overcrowded living room with its nickel-plated ashtrays that were seldom used, two table lamps wrapped in protective cellophane that were seldom lit, a flowered slip-cover on the large, hard couch on which people seldom sat, the wine-red drapes and embroidered white curtains that effectively kept out the sun. On a little love seat were two cushions inscribed with satin gold which Johnnie had proudly sent his mother while in the service: "To the sweetest Mom in the world."

"Nice," Peggy said, wondering now where *her* picture would fit in.

The spaghetti was steaming on the table. There was a tang in the air of spicy, strong food: her mother's Anglo-Saxon cooking, she thought, appeared almost anemic in contrast. But why so much of it? And why this silent, painful ritual? She was glad when they had finally sat down and began to eat in silence. She wondered at what point Johnnie would break the news to his parents about their engagement.

"Nobody is eating enough," Mrs. Constable said. "Peggy, take more."

Johnnie was conscious of the moment of hesitation as his mother called Peggy's name; she seemed to be weighing it on her tongue as well as in her mind. He got the distinct impression from the way she uttered the name that she didn't like Peggy. He thought: "It's a little too late to worry about that now." He wasn't going to worry about his mother's preferences; he had other things on his mind.

She had made no secret of the fact that she wanted him to marry the younger Narducci girl, the big-breasted Helen. "Johnnie, she's a good, pious girl. Has golden hands for the kitchen." He poured himself a glass of wine from the gallon jug his father had placed on the table. He drank it in several gulps.

"We got our marriage license," he announced.

The old man reacted instantly, his mouth forming a circle, several brown teeth showing. "Mama!" he exclaimed, "did you hear that?" He reached for the wine jug, almost dropped it, laughed at his clumsiness and started chattering: "Very good . . . *Molto buono*. I'm very glad—"

Johnnie glanced at his mother. The expression on her face did not change. But he could tell she was agitated by the way she was kneading a slice of bread into a round ball. The fingers moved furiously as if time were short. She nodded finally and said without looking at either one of them: "You have the license—that's fine. But you might have told your parents before."

"We meant to," Johnnie said earnestly. "But with things happening—I mean this Minelli thing—we wanted to get it settled."

"It's proper now to talk about a wedding," Mrs. Constable declared.

Johnnie and Peggy exchanged worried glances. "There isn't going to be a wedding," he said delicately. "We want it done in a day or two, at city hall."

Mrs. Constable leaned over toward Johnnie, a look of astonishment on her face. "Say again what you just said. I didn't hear—"

"Ma, we got no time to waste," he flung at her. "We're getting married in a day or two."

"No, you're not," she said. Her head was shaking vigor-

ously as if it had a will of its own. "You can't do it, John."

"Why not? Who's going to stop me?"

She ignored him and turned to Peggy: "We don't know anything about you," she said, a note of desperation in her voice.

"I'll tell you all there is," Peggy said, wondering where she should start. "There isn't much—"

"For one thing," Mrs. Constable interrupted, "John is a Catholic and you are Protestant—"

"In city hall it doesn't matter," Johnnie put in angrily.

"But it matters to a higher power," Mrs. Constable replied. "And it matters to your mother, a great deal. Alfredo would never do a thing like this to his mother."

"Alfredo, always Alfredo!" Johnnie shot back. "I'm not Alfredo!" He saw the red flush on her cheeks and realized that she was hurt. "What do you want us to do?" he said, pitching his voice lower, ashamed of his outburst.

Mrs. Constable looked reflectively at the tiny bread balls in front of her on the table. "Peggy will have to embrace the faith," she said.

Johnnie was on the point of nodding assent but changed his mind. He and Peggy had talked about this a long time ago. He had told her it would please his mother if she became a Catholic; he had explained to her that she would be required to take instructions in the faith for a short period of time and that banns would have to be called in church on three consecutive Sundays. Peggy had agreed. She wanted a church wedding. There had seemed to be all the time in the world. They had not counted on her becoming suddenly pregnant nor had they foreseen the Minelli business.

"How long would all this take?" Johnnie asked. He felt

his question was a compromise. But wasn't his mother's statement also a compromise?

"What's this business about how long it would take?" the old man scolded. "You waited a year, you can wait a little while longer . . . Your Mama and I were the same way," he said, his mind fading back thirty-five years and a great ocean. "We also wanted to get married right away. We thought only of ourselves, not our parents. But afterwards we were glad we listened to them. That wedding of ours!" he exclaimed, his eyes twinkling. "They must still talk about it in Lecce. The mayor himself was there. Guiseppe Cavallo came all the way from Naples to sing for us. . . . Your Mama looked like a princess in her wedding gown. We slaughtered an ox and drank a barrel of wine. Mama, am I exaggerating? It cost our parents so much money, they were in debt the rest of their lives. But it was worth it."

"Pa, that was the old country," Johnnie said, "and you had all the time in the world."

"I'll speak to Father D'Uva," Mrs. Constable said. "He is a friend and will do it as quickly as he can."

"If it can't be done right away, we don't want it," Johnnie declared.

The telephone rang shrilly. They all turned to look at it in surprise as if it were the thing they least expected. Johnnie walked to the telephone, picked up the receiver, listened. A harsh, guttural voice slithered through the wires: "You Constable?"

Johnnie nodded as if the owner of the unpleasant voice addressing him were in the room. "Yes," he said as an afterthought.

"You sonofabitch . . . snitcher. Better watch your step. We'll get you—"

Johnnie slammed the receiver on the carriage, choking off the trailing voice. The color was drained from his cheeks. He was conscious of the silence that wrapped itself around the room like a suffocating blanket.

The old man asked the inevitable question: "Who was it?"

"Nobody," Johnnie said, resuming his seat.

Peggy regarded him searchingly. "Tell us, Johnnie," she insisted.

"Some crank."

"What did he want?"

"Nothing."

"But he said something that upset you."

"Didn't upset me," he retorted, the color returning to his face. He started reaching for the wine jug but changed his mind; he didn't want them to see that his hands were trembling. "Pour me a drink," his eyes appealed to Peggy.

"Who was it?" she demanded.

"The man on the moon," Johnnie replied. "He's mad at me because of Minelli . . . Said I better watch my step."

She had been staring at him while he spoke, but now her gaze wavered and her face flushed. "Oh, no, Johnnie," she cried.

There was a pause as if they were listening to the echo of Peggy's voice. Then the old man said: "Did you recognize who it was?"

Johnnie smashed his fist on the table. "Forget it!" he roared. Suddenly he turned to his mother: "You were saying about Father D'Uva. What were you saying?"

"I know he'll be glad to perform the wedding in his church," she said calmly.

"When will you talk to him?"

"Tomorrow," she replied.

"Godammit!" Johnnie cried defiantly. "We're going to have a wedding. Peggy, I changed my mind, we're going to have a wedding. A big one, with all the trimmings!"

She nodded absently. She wasn't listening.

Across the table Johnnie watched his mother's face lit up by a suggestion of a smile. "I'm glad," he heard her say. He wasn't sure whether her gaze indicated that she understood and approved his defiance. Perhaps, he thought, she smiled on account of the delay. He dismissed the latter thought. Yet, he found it necessary to warn her: "Ma, remember, it's got to be soon."

"It's got to be *right*," she corrected him.

"I think we should notify the police," Mr. Constable declared.

"Armando, you are growing old," his wife said.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS QUITE EARLY in the morning, but The Block was already seething with indignation.

Did you hear about the telephone call?

Housewives talked about the threat across porches, leaning out of windows, in their back yards and on the way to do their shopping; in the evening, the breadwinners heard about it at their supper tables. Some of them left their food unfinished and hurried over to the Constable home. The old man met them at the door and his grateful smile indicated that he had been expecting them and was not disappointed. The neighbors inquired about Johnnie whom they hadn't seen since Minelli's arrest, and the old man told them that Johnnie had gone to the police station again to prod the authorities about the reward money. Even before the men had all found seats, there was another threatening phone call. Armando Constable's hand wavered, his lips muttered a string of curses and his face became flushed. He hung up and said grievously to his neighbors: "It's the second time." He waited for comment but they remained silent. "This morning I went to the police," he resumed. "Johnnie said not to go, he said he wasn't going to let a crank scare him, but I went anyway."

"What did the police say?" Mike Fortugno wanted to know.

Mr. Constable shrugged. "They also think it was a

crank. They say they can't see who else would do a thing like that."

"Then that's what it must be, Armando," Dominic Sciortino said, regarding his Toscanelli cigar with narrow eyes. He was a small, plump man with massive shoulders and huge arms. He and Mr. Constable had met thirty years ago, "coming off the boat" from Europe, had been partners for many years and remained good friends.

"But this is the second time," Armando Constable complained.

"Probably the same one," the barber observed. He was a balding young man, the father of two, and one of the moving spirits in The Block.

"And even if it wasn't a crank," Mr. Luca, the groceryman who lived in the middle of The Block, said, "there is still nothing to worry about. The law is on your side. It will protect your son. After all, he helped the law catch Minelli."

"And there's public opinion," the barber said weightily. He could not help observing that at least half the men assembled needed to have their hair cut. "I talk to people all the time, so I know. The hoodlums aren't going to fool with public opinion. That's one thing they're going to lay off of."

"Besides," Dominic Sciortino put in, "Johnnie is famous. His picture was in all the papers. Nobody is going to lay a hand on him."

The old man nodded, feeling somewhat reassured. "Still," he said, trying to take in with his sweeping glance the dozen or more men in the apartment, "I'd feel much better if there was a policeman outside the house and if Johnnie stopped running around so much."

Mr. Luca, sitting back on a stool in the corner, couldn't

help chuckling to himself. Something was happening to the old man, he observed. "You don't need a policeman," he said mildly and tolerantly. "Who'll dare come monkeying in *our* block? We'd rip him to pieces. Get what I mean?" He smiled significantly, eyeing the others. "You can count on your neighbors."

"You sure can!" Larry Dante said angrily. An old school chum of Johnnie's, he was a squarely built man in his late twenties, the father of three small children, part owner of a contracting business. Spearing the air with a threatening cigar, Larry concluded: "I'd like to *see* them come monkeying in this block!"

"Me too," Cosmo Bari declared. "We all appreciate what Johnnie did," he continued earnestly, "and we'll stand by him." He was a tall, blond man who had inherited the merry-go-round from his father. He liked Johnnie and wanted him as a partner.

Several heads nodded in assent. The old man was pleased.

"After all," the barber soothed Mr. Constable's frayed nerves as if he were applying a balmy salve to a customer's shaved face, "we live in civilized times. Nor do we live in the jungle. Do I make myself clear? But," he concluded, "if you need us—for any reason at all—you can count on us."

"I know a police lieutenant, a customer of mine," Mr. Mollinari, the downstairs tenant, said. "If you want me to, I'll talk to him."

"Young Rinaldi who is in the district attorney's office goes with my daughter," Mr. Luca declared. "I might talk to him."

"After all you and your wife done for us," Mr. Anto-

nino, the father of six, said, "we aren't going to let you down."

His composure sufficiently restored, Mr. Constable went down the cellar and fetched a gallon of store wine. "I haven't made my own wine in two years," he found it necessary to apologize, "but this isn't too bad. It's Rossini's." He poured the wine and watched his guests drink slowly, and every once in a while he glanced over his shoulder at the telephone which he was beginning to despise. "I'm not afraid for myself," he said, ashamed of his agitation. "I don't scare so easy." His eye wandered to the photograph on the wall which showed him as a carabinieri during the first world war. "I've been through a few campaigns," he said meaningfully. "My nose is familiar with the smell of gunpowder. I was at Gallipoli and Caporetto both!"

His guests listened respectfully and nodded. They had all heard the old man's tales before, particularly Dominic Sciortino. But Armando Constable was the founder of The Block of which they were all proud. They felt they owed him the courtesy of listening. In addition, most of them were indebted to him in one way or another. He had helped them with money, advice and scalpel. He had never asked for repayment. Now he appeared in trouble.

"We're with you," Mike Fortugno declared, glancing at his watch and leaping to his feet before the old man launched into another story. Outside, he said to Mr. Luca: "Ever since that accident when he fell down the scaffold, he sure acts like an old man. See how scared he was?"

Mr. Luca nodded. It was late and he was sleepy. "When you sit with your hands folded," he said, glancing with satisfaction at the light in his window, "the imagination takes over."

"Still—" the barber reconsidered, "this telephone call. It didn't come out of his head. We were there when it happened."

"It's nothing," Mr. Luca said deprecatingly. "Nobody is going to bother Johnnie. The Block won't stand for it."

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, the phone calls became more frequent, more abusive. The old man was constantly hobbling between his home and the police station. Then the crank notes began arriving, most of them written in illegible, tortured hand. They came bearing the postmark of many places, one even came from Hawaii, and the theme of revenge ran like a bloody thread through all of them. Johnnie read the notes, laughed and tore them up. His father gathered up the torn pieces, put them together and ran to the police station with them.

One night a policeman appeared across the street and for a short period of time he was a new addition to The Block. A detective spent several days in the Constable apartment intercepting threatening phone calls and handwriting experts analyzed the voluminous crank notes. There was constant talk of *clues* and *impending arrests*, but in the end the Constables were left to shift for themselves. Mama Constable, whose plans for the marriage precluded any haste, suddenly acquired a sense of urgency and decided not to put off any longer a meeting with Father D'Uva.

The old man abandoned his favorite place at the dining-room table and moved to the tomblike living room where he parted the massive wine-red drapes and gazed suspiciously up and down The Block. He was trying to pick out

strange figures moving in the shadows. He heard footsteps near the door and started. Johnnie entered and threw his jacket on one of the chairs.

"What are you looking for?" he asked, amused.

"Never mind what I'm looking for," Mr. Constable retorted testily. "I don't want you out alone at night."

"Nobody is going to kidnap me." He sat down and stretched out his stiff left leg.

"I'm not so sure," the old man said, gazing alternately at Johnnie and the street.

"There'd be no percentage in it," Johnnie asserted. God—he was tired! Shunted from one bigshot to another. "Minelli would have to pay for it in the end." He closed his eyes wearily.

"Minelli could have an excuse. He could say I got nothing to do with it, I'm in jail."

"But what's he stand to gain?" Johnnie asked impatiently. "Minelli's a three-time loser. He'll be put away for life. If anything happens to me, he's liable to get the electric chair." He closed his eyes again and heard the calliope grinding out the final tortured strains of a Sousa march . . . About time, he thought, they changed that tune; twenty years was long enough playing the same thing over and over again; if Cosmo and he ever got together on that partnership deal, there'd be a few changes made, particularly where it concerned the music. It was off key. But tonight, for some reason, he felt less annoyed with it than was usually the case. Tonight it didn't annoy him because he detected in the music a sense of the unchanging. The music stopped suddenly and he envisioned the riders dismounting the wooden horses. "I don't think they'd fool with the law," he said as an afterthought. "I got too much publicity."

"You *got*," the old man said significantly, "but you're not getting any more. You're not news to the papers." The honeymoon, he thought, was over. "And as far as the *police* are concerned," the old man cried fervently as if that were perennially a sore point, "they act altogether as if you were poison to them. I never saw anything like it!"

"The feelings are mutual," Johnnie said. He didn't see what the old man was getting hot under the collar about.

The telephone rang but neither one of them rose to answer it. Of late, they ceased answering the phone; invariably the caller turned out to be a male with a guttural voice who scorched your ear with obscene threats and hung up. Both men listened to the long, shrill ringing and resumed talking only after it had stopped.

"What happened at the hearing?" the old man asked. It was a question he asked frequently of late, one that was becoming part of their everyday living.

The answer was not unexpected. Johnnie shrugged and said: "Nothing." He didn't want to talk about it and the old man did not prod him. "They're still *studying* the case," he mimicked. God—he was tired! Must have seen more than a dozen bigshots today. He was sick of their suave talk and their red faces. The worst part of it was, he didn't know how to fight them. They didn't deny his right to the reward money. But how about the two detectives who had also put in a claim for the dough? It was their word against his. "They say you happened to have come along while the arrest was being made, Mr. Constable. We don't question your honesty and integrity"—this after a long, long pause—"but as you yourself can see, the case needs further study." He had never in his life come up against such double talk. He had brought them proof; the landlady from the rooming house on Washington Street had testified on

his behalf after he had promised her several hundred dollars for her troubles. He had even brought Mr. Gilder, his former boss, who repeated a conversation that had taken place between them after Johnnie saw Minelli on the bus. And finally he had brought Peggy who told them about that fateful evening when she had "convinced" Johnnie—that was the word she used—to inform the police about Minelli's hideout. The only person, the sergeant who could have cinched it for Johnnie, just shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands wide. The authorities had listened attentively. "We'll let you know," they said. How was he to fight them? There was no pin-pointing the blame. He had never in his life been confronted by this yes-and-no breed. You don't take a swing at a guy who says he'll do the best he can for you. But once he left their offices he saw them all as a bunch of vultures—such as he had seen in Dakar on his way to Italy—trying to get their claws into that fat, juicy ten thousand, his ten thousand! Sons of bitches. The telephone ringing tore him back to the present. He leaped to his feet, ran into the dining room, seized the receiver and ripped it from the wall.

"Now ring, you bastard!" Johnnie cried, tossing the receiver and the dangling wire on the floor.

The old man chuckled mirthlessly. "Good boy! If we could do the same with the mailbox downstairs," he added cunningly, "maybe we'd be rid of them."

CHAPTER EIGHT

JOHNNIE GLANCED AT HIS WATCH. It was a quarter to nine. Peggy would be in front of Father D'Uva's house at nine o'clock. He was to meet her there and they would go in and see the priest together. He had to have some assurance that the instructions in the faith would not be too prolonged an affair.

He gathered his penciled notes hastily and put them away in a drawer. He had sweated over the notes, jotting down all the evidence, cogent reasons, incontrovertible proof . . . Next time the authorities called him for what seemed like an endless series of hearings, he would not stand there like a fool with nothing to say. Might even go see a lawyer. Cut in another vulture on the quickly disappearing carcass of a reward.

He rose quickly and put on his jacket. Passing the living room, Johnnie saw his father sitting near the window, watching the street below. "See anything suspicious?" he asked jokingly.

"Be careful, John," the old man said without turning.

He left the house and emerged on the street. The Molinaris were on the porch, the Missus fanning herself with a tabloid. He thought the woman looked at him strangely; involuntarily his fingers touched his tie and he felt his collar as if to make sure nothing was out of place.

A warm breeze blew in from the river disturbing the

leaves of the young trees on both sides of the street. There was a lingering odor in the air of cooked oil and rich, thick sauces. Gazing down the length of The Block Johnnie saw Dominic Sciortino puttering under the hood of his old truck which was laden with bricks and mortar. Mike Fortugno, in shirt sleeves, was bending over one of his plants. Several men were arguing mildly on the sidewalk. Cosmo Bari waved a roll of dollar bills in the air. "I'll take Cleveland, even money!" Cosmo declared. Cosmo and his roll and his merry-go-round. "Have to talk to him soon," Johnnie thought. Only question was: if he had to split the reward money three ways, two dicks and himself, would enough of it be left to buy a piece of Cosmo's business? Ought to talk to him anyway; time to get the show on the road, time to get the ball rolling. "Tomorrow," he thought, turning at the corner, "tomorrow I'll talk to him."

The house where Father D'Uva lived was no more than three blocks away on the corner of Perry and Haskell Streets right next to the church. The church, one of the oldest in the neighborhood, served The Block as well as adjoining Little Italy. Johnnie had been baptized there; had been confirmed there, had sung in the boys' choir and gone to his first confession.

He walked rapidly, rehearsing in his mind the excuses he might be called upon to give if the priest questioned him when he had last been to confession or high communion. "Might come clean," he thought, "tell the truth. Almost seven years ago, in Naples, after a rough night of wine, women and song—" Leave it at that. But the real one, the sixty-four dollar question was what to do about Peggy's pregnancy? Ask for special dispensation? Play dumb and not mention it? Should have thought of that one when he had let his mother talk them into this conversion

business; should have put his foot down. Could have avoided all this. Been married at city hall where all they required was a license . . .

Johnnie turned on Perry Street. Though it was dark, he caught sight of Father D'Uva's residence at the far end of the block. A solitary street lamp cast a circular light on the house entrance. Peggy wasn't there. Late as usual. Suddenly he heard the screech of brakes and the moan of tires rubbing against the curb. A man jumped out of the car and lunged toward Johnnie who side-stepped just in time. "Watch out where you're—" By the time he realized that the stranger was not drunk, the other came at him again. Johnnie caught sight of a metal object flashing in the air; it appeared out of nowhere, a gruesome-looking weapon, poised over his head for a split second before striking. His own right arm shot up blindly to deflect the blow from his head. The blackjack smashed against his shoulder and he thought he heard the snapping of bones. A film moved across his eyes and he rubbed them desperately. As if by some ungoverned reflex his hands were in his pockets and he was vaguely conscious of a futile, time-wasting gesture . . . his hands searching for a weapon. Nothing in his pockets, nothing but a shoehorn. What a godamn . . . Suddenly his feverish mind traced a course to the metal kneecap. "But it's screwed on to the bone!" he thought dismally. He was dimly aware that the other one had moved off and was getting set for another blow.

Johnnie lunged forward, grabbed the startled assailant's neck with both hands and slammed his silver knee into the man's groin. The knee found its mark, caught fire with the pain and appeared to hang limply for an instant. The man was on the ground, rolling convulsively, bellowing and crying for help. Johnnie started running. His knee

wavered, as if the screws attaching the metal to the bone had come loose, but he kept running, retracing his steps. At the corner of Perry Street he stopped and glanced over his shoulder as if trying to memorize the face. It occurred to him now that he had not even had a proper look at the face. It had appeared as a blur, a part of the night, an appendage to the arm waving the blackjack. The man, both hands clutching his groin, was trying to get up. He paused in a kneeling position as if he were saying a prayer.

Johnnie turned the corner leading toward The Block. He hopped on his right foot crazily as if playing a children's game. His right shoulder sent spasms of pain through his body. The spasms were like short, quick impulses, striking sharply then receding. His eyes measuring the distance between himself and the house caught sight of the sign: Keep Our Block the Garden Spot of the City. Beyond the sign were the blazing lights from the open windows and the warm, welcome voices of the neighbors.

CHAPTER NINE

"... ALL I HAD IN MY POCKET was a godamn shoehorn," he said. He lay on the living-room couch, an ice pack on his shoulder. The flesh around the area where he had been struck was turning purple. Dr. Pallozo had found no broken bones. "A shoehorn," he repeated. "How the hell do you expect a guy . . . ?" He turned his head and looked at his parents. They weren't listening.

"You are not going out anymore," Mrs. Constable said. She appeared to be thinking out loud, uttering the words for Johnnie's benefit as well as for the record. She saw her husband shaking his head in agreement.

"If I'd had a knife . . . even a pocketknife—"

"You stay home," she said. She kept repeating the phrase like a litany.

"Bright idea, Ma," he said jokingly. "I'll bury myself in the house."

"Till it blows over," she said.

"And the wedding?" he demanded, angered by the absurdity of her suggestion. "And what about a job? We have to eat."

"The wedding can be right here in the house," she answered readily. Her eyes took in the dimensions of the living room and the dining room beyond it. If she trimmed her guest list, the wedding could be held in the house.

"And a job?" he prodded her. "Or are we retiring on the reward money which I haven't got?"

"A job will wait," she replied. "We'll get along. We have good neighbors who will help us. We'll pay them back."

"Ma, stop talking nonsense." He sat up. "I'm not getting holed up in the house."

"For the time being that's the only thing to do," the old man said, joining the argument. He sat in his usual place near the living-room window where he moved aside the drapes and glanced at the street below.

"They can keep this up for a year," Johnnie said.

"Then you'll stay home that long," his mother declared. "One of my sons was killed. The other is going to live."

"Nobody is going to kill me," Johnnie retorted, annoyed. "People don't go around killing each other. It's not like animals in some jungle. What's the matter with you?"

"Then what about last night?" his father demanded.

"What *about* last night?" Johnnie said, shrugging and feeling the pain in his shoulder. "Might have been a guy trying to rob me. Might have been some nut that ran away from an insane asylum. It happens all the time, lately. Who knows . . . ?"

"And it might have been one of Minelli's goons," the old man prompted.

Johnnie shook his head. What did Minelli stand to gain? No, Minelli was too smart a cookie to pull a stunt like that.

"You'll stay home," she said.

"Okay, Ma, change your tune."

"One is enough," she said, glancing at Alfredo's picture on the wall.

"What makes you think the house is safe?" he ques-

tioned, following the course of her eyes as they dipped from Alfredo's picture on the wall to the floor. "You might as well lock me up in the cellar and nail up the door."

She caught the sarcasm in his voice. "If you have to go to the cellar, you'll go. And if I have to, I'll sit in front of the cellar door. And the first one who comes near it, I'll scratch out his eyes."

Both men listened to her threats and finally the old man said: "No, Mariannina."

"No—what?" she demanded belligerently.

"We don't need the cellar—yet," he said thoughtfully. "We'll talk to the men in The Block. Together we'll decide what to do."

"The men in The Block can't lead me around by the hand," Johnnie objected. "They got their own lives to live."

"Never mind," the old man said, waving a hand. "They'll help. In our block people have always helped each other. When they needed Mama or me, we helped them, too . . . It's the only way."

"Tomorrow I will go see the police," Mrs. Constable said.

Johnnie nodded. The men in The Block and the police . . . He didn't see where it would hurt talking to the men and getting them steamed up. As for the police . . .

"I don't think the cops like me," Johnnie said. "What's more, I don't think they give a good godamn . . . You know what I *really* think?" He shook his head violently. "I'm a fourteen-carat dope! A shoehorn in my pocket!"

He lay down again and closed his eyes. His parents were hurling questions at him—his mother wanted to know the location of the nearest station house—but he didn't bother answering. The summer noises reached up from The Block and he tried to sort them out in his mind. He heard

the accordion wrestling with *Come Back To Sorrento*, the accompanying tenor hopelessly off key. "Everybody is out in the street," he thought, carving little pleasure out of the night's magic. He heard the rich laughter, the sounds of female shoes-clop-clopping on the sidewalk, the flirtations and whispers of lovers. Beyond the street, in the amusement center, the merry-go-round glided smoothly on its perennial course. Although it was almost midnight, he was certain that every horse had a rider astride it. "A gold mine," he thought. "How long are you going to put off talking to Cosmo?" He could almost visualize his favorite, Yankee Clipper, galloping around the course, lacquer white with a bushy yellow tail. The Clipper had been his favorite ever since he could remember. As a little boy, whenever his father punished him, and this was quite often, Johnnie would run with his troubles to the white wooden horse. He would mount the animal, embrace its neck with his arms and sob into its ear while both of them circled madly. The horse had a magic way of soothing him, of whispering consolation in its own mute way. It would gallop off and away into far lands where boys lived happily with no threat of a father's razor strop over their heads . . . His mind wandered to the Paradise Bar. He tried to enumerate all who might be there, drinking sociably and having a merry time. Of course Larry Dante would be there and Mike Fortugno having a last quick beer before turning in for the night, and Cosmo collecting his bet, Cleveland having won. That Cosmo Boy! Most of the guys from The Block, the single ones and the married ones who could still get away without raising too much of a fuss, would be there. It occurred to him that he'd been so harassed in the past few days there hadn't even been time to sample their reaction to his notoriety. Well, hell, they had all

talked about turning in Minelli—but he had actually done it. He had no doubt that they had seen his pictures in the papers . . . Johnnie shifted his body. Somewhere in the corner of his mind he was aware that the couch was hard as a rock, but he dismissed the thought. Something else agitated his mind at the moment. "How many people get their pictures in the papers?" he thought. Most people lived out their drab lives and the only time they saw their names in print was a listing in the telephone book or an obituary notice after they died. He tried to imagine how each one of his friends would react, how they would pump his hand, thump him on the back, ask him how it felt being famous, offer to buy him a few. Atta boy, Johnnie, atta boy . . .

"Johnnie, I want the address of the police station," his mother said.

He opened his eyes slowly and stared at her. "Oh, yes," he finally said, reciting the address for her. He tried to resume his reverie but failed. His mind appeared to be off on another binge, but one much closer to the problems at hand. What would have happened, he speculated, if instead of a shoehorn there had been a gun in his pocket?

CHAPTER TEN

THE BLACK DRESS Mrs. Constable put on to go to the police station early next morning was the same one she had worn to Alfredo's funeral some years ago. There was no special significance in this. It was the only decent dress she had and its color was black. All her life she had worn black, the prevalent—if not favorite—color among the women of her native Calabria. She abandoned it once, on her wedding day, and then again after coming to America, but she always came back to it as if black were the color that suited her best. She saw that America was not much different than Italy. As far as she was concerned, America was merely an extension of Calabria. For while her menfolk left Little Italy in their daily occupations and mingled with the world "outside," her America was still Little Italy where she spoke her native tongue, cooked native dishes, listened to Italian radio programs. There had never been any compelling need to learn the American language, as her husband had learned it. She knew all it was necessary to know in order to get along in her small world of The Block and the home. Her America was her family, the fine house her husband had built for her with his own hands, the running water in the kitchen, the abundant food on the table, the parish church. Her role in life as she visualized it (and she wasn't the only one) was to serve her men, to humor and to love them, to be a mir-

ror of their desires, an echo of their words. After the shocking news of her Alfredo's death in the war, her world became even smaller. She imprisoned herself inside the house. She attended to her chores, she always did *that*, but saw few people. Being an energetic person and realizing that her energies were no longer absorbed by the house, she sought out those who needed her help. She tended sick children, went on errands for neighbors and cooked meals for them. In The Block they started calling her "Mama," the good, pious Mama, who would surely go to heaven. But in the house she still set the table as if her Alfredo were alive and her world, the small world, were still intact.

Today, for the first time in a long time, Mama Constable ventured outside The Block. Even while dressing she was rehearsing in her mind what she would say to them. This, she thought, was necessary on account of her English being so poor. She knew well enough what had to be said to the authorities. She meant to tell them about the incident with the blackjack, about her son who was home in bed this very minute, nursing a shoulder wound, his knee swollen. Her son, she meant to tell them, had fought for America, had given his blood, had come home with a shattered knee. He was entitled to have their protection against those who were threatening his life. And so was she! Another son of hers, he never did come back! What were they going to do about it? As she thought about it on her way to the police station, her anger mounted. She would hold them personally responsible if anything happened to her son. Beyond the fact that they owed her son protection, how could human beings remain indifferent when one of their fellows was endangered?

The only question was how to translate all of it into

English. She stood before them, the authorities with their cold, alien faces and her tongue was tied. She spoke to them in broken English interspersing it with Italian. It seemed to her they should understand. Her son's name was not strange to them.

"We need your help," she beseeched them.

"We'll investigate," they said.

She listened to the word, weighed its meaning, and something told her it was not the word she had come this far to hear.

"They will kill him," she said. "I have lost one. One is enough."

They fidgeted in their polished chairs.

"We'll investigate," they said. "What else can we do?"

They shunted her from one large office to another. A savage anger took possession of her. "I will stay here," she shouted at them in her native tongue, "until you promise to do something for us!"

They tried to shoo her out of the office, but she would not go. They closed their office door in her face and she retreated to the corridor where she wandered the rest of the day, a massive figure dressed in black, her coarse peasant face ennobled by a mask of deep tragedy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BELL RANG and they heard footsteps on the stairs. Mr. Constable went to the door and unlocked it. Lately he had got into the habit of locking and latching the door. He meant to speak to Mollinari, his tenant on the first floor, about keeping the one downstairs locked too. Dominic Sciortino was the first to enter, followed by Mike Fortugno, Luca, Antonino, Johnnie's friends, Cosmo and Larry, and several others, among them the four men who played cards on the sidewalk every evening by the light of a lantern.

"How'ya Silver," Cosmo said to Johnnie, "how's it feel to be famous? I tell everybody this guy who had his picture in the papers, he's a personal friend of mine. Mind if I touch you?"

"Not on the right shoulder," Johnnie said, forcing a smile. "That's the one that hurts."

"I heard about it," Larry Dante said. "Your Pa told me. Got any idea who it was?"

"Search me," Johnnie said.

"One of those things, eh?" Cosmo said, smiling sheepishly.

Johnnie watched them find seats. For some strange reason he was disturbed that his friends did not have more to say. They had turned away abruptly—as if all that had to be said had been said—and found seats. He was conscious that they were eyeing him curiously; it reminded

him of the way Mrs. Mollinari had looked at him the other night. When his eyes met theirs, he noticed how they shifted uncomfortably and directed their gaze elsewhere. He was aware of a strained silence in the room. He recalled another gathering in the house that took place when he had come back from overseas. Then too he had been the focal point and the visitors, with few exceptions, had been the same men. They had come, he remembered, bearing the silver knee cap, made according to specifications and inscribed. Their hero wasn't going to wear a plain stainless steel vitallium cap! And they had slapped him on the back, had sung Italian songs, had laughed until morning.

"Tell them what happened, Johnnie," he heard his father say.

"You tell them, Pa. You know as much about it as I do."

The old man hesitated, then started talking. He talked as if his fate were in the hands of the twenty or more men crowding the two adjoining rooms, as if they held the key to his salvation. He told them about Johnnie's futile attempts at getting the reward, the assault, his wife's disappointing interviews. Then, as if to cap his revelations, he ordered Johnnie to remove his shirt and showed them the ugly wound.

Mike Fortugno was the first to speak. "It's time something was done!" he exclaimed, his eyes flashing angrily.

"What do you think, Mike?" the old man asked, a note of hope in his voice.

"Why—raise hell with the authorities," the barber replied, resuming his seat.

"We did that already," Johnnie said. He was surprised that Mike had nothing more startling to offer.

"We've got to keep trying," the barber said. "Also get the societies and clubs riled up. I'll mention it at the next

meeting of the Mazzini Society, Larry can raise hell with the Garibaldi group, Antonino ought to bring it up at the Democratic Club—”

“I’ll talk to my friend the politician,” Luca said. “I mentioned it to him once but I’ll do it again.”

The old man punctuated each angry word and each suggestion with quick nods of his head. “That’s it,” he cried. “Let them know. Let them come and see for themselves. Tell them Armando Constable is in trouble. They’ll understand. They’ll help.”

Dominic Sciortino promised to speak to his wife and have her make a plea in church on the following Sunday. The others thought that was a good idea and said they would instruct their wives to do the same.

“But while this is being done,” Mike Fortugno said to Johnnie, “it’d be best if you stayed in the house. They aren’t going to bother you here. Not in *this* block,” he concluded meaningfully, glancing at his brawny companions.

“I told him the same thing,” Mama Constable said. She stood on the threshold of the kitchen, removed from the men’s deliberations until she could no longer keep silent. “I told him to stay in the house.”

“Do the best I can,” Johnnie said wryly. “I couldn’t go out if I wanted to.” He nudged in the direction of his right shoulder.

“Well, you stay put till we figure something out,” Larry Dante said.

After the visitors had gone, the old man said: “Now we will see something! When the people in this block get together, things start happening.”

“Like what, for instance?” Johnnie demanded. “The best they could do was to tell me to hang around the house.”

“Till they figure something out,” the old man said.

"I'm not going to do it, Pa!"

"You'll do it—" the old man started saying. Suddenly his eyes were riveted on the gap under the door. "Look . . . look—" he cried, pointing at the door where a note had been inserted. Johnnie hurled himself at the door and pulled it open. He saw a dark figure scamper down the stairs and disappear. He bent down, feeling a sharp pain in his knee, and picked up the note. He unfolded it and nodded while reading it as if what was written there confirmed what he had suspected all along.

Don't think you kin hide from us squeeler. We'll come and git you in da hous if we hafta. Your pals wont help you neither.

"Let me see it!" the old man cried, grabbing the note. His eyes bulging with terror skipped over the pencilled words several times and his lips articulated each word. "I'll show it to the men," he said finally. "I must show it to them right away."

CHAPTER TWELVE

OUTSIDE THE CONSTABLE HOUSE a policeman walked with measured step, twirling his night stick as if he were practicing to become a juggler in a circus. He walked from the house to the sign on the corner: Keep Our Block the Garden Spot of the City. Passersby stopped across the street and gazed with curiosity at the second-floor windows with the shades drawn. They shook their heads sympathetically, having learned the contents of the threatening note, shrugged their shoulders and went about their everyday business.

That evening strange and curious things began happening in The Block. The card players abandoned the sidewalk under the pretext that it was too dark and moved their game inside one of the homes; the accordion player and the tenor carried on in whispers and they could hardly be heard; most of the neighbors removed themselves to their back yards to snare a few stray evening breezes. By the end of the week The Block was unrecognizable; it was almost deserted.

Inside the Constable home the men talked almost in whispers. "Is there any place you could hide?" Mike Fortugno said to Johnnie.

"No place that I know of," Johnnie replied. He glanced reproachfully at his father. Why did the old man keep summoning them? The first time there had been a houseful

of them clamoring for action. Now only four had come: Sciortino, Larry and Cosmo, besides the barber. Luca had sent word that he was sick, Antonino was tied up. Mollinari promised to come later in the evening but he must have forgotten about it. Only one had probably told the near-truth, Johnnie reasoned, when he sent a message claiming his wife didn't want him to get mixed up in the affair.

"I have a cousin in Rhode Island," Dominic Sciortino said, "he has a big farm. I'm sure you could stay with him till things blow over."

"Thanks, Uncle Dominic."

"What about my cellar?" Larry Dante suggested. "My wife'll feed you. I'll put a radio in. You can listen to the ball games. Hell—"

"'Preciate it," Johnnie said. "But I don't think that'll do it."

"What will?" Larry persisted. "Be reasonable, man. You fade out for a while and when things quiet down, you come back."

Fade out! It was easy for them to say it! Like falling off a log. What did they have to lose? How *could* he fade out? No money was coming in; there weren't any prospects of a job; the reward was still hanging fire and Peggy's belly was getting bigger. Johnnie shook his head. "Minelli can keep this up forever," he said to Larry, "if it is Minelli."

"What difference does it make, Minelli or Joe Blow?" Larry argued. "A threat's a threat."

"No difference," Johnnie said thoughtfully. "Only I don't think hiding'll do it. I appreciate your offer. Take a raincheck on it. Thanks a lot."

"What do you plan to do?" the barber inquired, fingering a bald spot on his head.

"What the hell *can* I do now!" Johnnie cried impotently, slamming his palm against the trick knee. "If I could get around, I'd show 'em. I'd—"

"Don't pay any attention to him," Mama Constable interrupted. "He won't do a thing! We'll lock him up in the cellar, if we have to." She looked to her husband for support and he nodded absently but said nothing.

For the first time since Armando could remember, The Block had let him down. He couldn't get over the fact that of all the neighbors he had begged to come, only four answered his plea. And even these four had nothing more to offer than advising his Johnnie to escape to a farm or hide in someone's cellar. As cellars went, he had a good one of his own. He had looked for something else from them. He had hoped they would arouse the people in the neighborhood, as they had promised, build little fires under the complacent bottoms of their societies and clubs. *Madonna*, didn't they realize a man, one of their own men who lived in their very midst, was being threatened with death?

"Look here!" he demanded. He had a right to know. They had promised him. "What about the clubs and the societies and churches? What happened?"

"It's been raised," Dominic Sciortino said. "My wife raised it in church."

Fortugno nodded. "The Mazzini Society has it under consideration. I brought it up myself. They'll take it up under proper order of business. But in the meantime—"

The visitors shook hands and promised to come back, if they were needed. But only Dominic Sciortino returned. He came several evenings later, carrying a bag of groceries. There was money in his pocket which he meant to offer to his friend. He had collected the money with the barber's

help. There had been no difficulty. The neighbors gave cheerfully; they appeared almost over-eager to give. The difficulty, as far as Sciortino was concerned, was how to offer the money to his friend without embarrassing him. Sciortino decided to wait.

The old man fought back tears. "I don't know what's happening to me," he said. "I'm so upset, I don't even pay attention to my fig tree. It's going to die on me, I know it's going to die . . . Dominic," he grabbed his friend by the wrist, "why have our friends abandoned us?"

Dominic Sciortino shrugged. "It isn't that at all," he said.

"What is it, then? Why don't they come?" Armando Constable demanded.

Sciortino hesitated, gazing stealthily at his former partner. He felt hot and uncomfortable. For the first time in thirty years—that's how long they were friends—he found it necessary to select his words with caution and to make these words as vague as possible. He didn't like doing it. "They speak of you all the time," he said. "In fact, that's all we speak about in The Block. Everybody wants to help." It occurred to him this might be the proper time to offer the money.

"But we don't see them," Armando Constable said. "They don't come here. Even Mollinari who lives under our own roof no longer comes. Why is it, Dominic? Have any of them been threatened? My wife spoke to some of them today. They said nothing to her about being threatened."

Dominic Sciortino shifted uneasily in his chair as if his bulky body could not find a place for itself. "I suppose people like to play safe," he said reluctantly. "They figure if they mind their own business nobody is going to bother

them. You know yourself, Armando, the first thing we learned when we got off the boat was: *mind your own business.*"

"But isn't our business their business too?" Armando Constable pleaded. "Today they are after my boy. If nobody helps him he has no chance. One man is easy to pick off. If people don't help each other, tomorrow somebody else's son will be the victim, yours, Narducci's, Luca's. In the end it will be like beasts in the jungle. The ones with the sharp teeth will rule, the robbers, the Minellis."

Dominic Sciortino listened and nodded. "I'll talk to them again," he finally said. "Maybe tomorrow or the next day I can bring a bunch of them over and we'll figure something out."

On the following evening he came again. And again he came alone. Instead of offering the money to his friend, Sciortino put it in the grocery bag he had brought along, hoping they would find it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HE FELT he would go stark raving mad if he waited any longer. He was finished with hanging around the house, nursing the damned knee. First the shoulder then the knee. He was obsessed by one idea now: a gun. He had to have a gun! The idea burned itself into his brain and gave him no rest. Everything that had happened in the past few days led him to this one, inevitable conclusion: he had to have a gun. The threatening note inserted under his very door had proven to him that the house was not safe—as if he hadn't suspected that all along. The neighbors' red hot indignation he saw reduced to a tepid indifference. He didn't blame them for it; they owed him nothing. And finally his mother had come home saying Father D'Uva would require three months, at the least, to instruct Peggy in the faith. Three months! If the old lady weren't so blind she could see how Peggy's belly was getting larger! The thing had to be done right away; they had to get married. In city hall—in a hurry. Not in three months. *Now!* He had to get out of the house. And that's exactly what he was going to do. Only this time they weren't going to catch him with a shoehorn in his pocket, whatthehell ever they were . . .

His mind made up, he wondered what would be the best way of leaving the house without making too much of a fuss. His parents would raise holy hell and so would Peggy.

The three of them were a part of a conspiracy to keep him imprisoned. He tried out his knee, walking the length of the apartment from the living room to the kitchen. They were watching him, all three of them, regarding him curiously. He didn't give a damn. The knee would hold. It better hold!

He waited until the following afternoon. His father, who had developed a fondness for sleep lately, was dozing in the bedroom while his mother stretched out on the living-room couch "for a couple of seconds." Peggy was away at her job. He tiptoed to the bathroom, let the water trickle in the sink and shaved. The hair sprouting on his face was several days old and made him look like a derelict. "Like in the army," he thought, "when you were stuck in a mudhole in a corner of a mountain for days, going no place in particular." Must remember to take along a hat and a pair of sunglasses. He realized it wasn't much of a disguise, but it was better than nothing. Going out now would be better than in the evening when each corner was another ambush. He dressed in the bathroom and regarded his smooth face in the mirror. "I feel like I'm getting up after a sickness," he thought. His face was pale and the flesh around the prominent cheekbones was drawn and taut.

He walked lightly from the bathroom, gazing at his mother's bulk on the living-room couch and at the door. In the middle of the dining room his knee suddenly gave and he crashed to the floor.

"Sonofabitch!" He rose, cursing savagely. His mother was standing over him, a wild, dishevelled look in her eye. His father appeared half asleep, mumbling: "What's happened?"

"Get the hell outa my way!" Johnnie roared, plunging

for the door and unlocking it. Their hands reached out for him, but he evaded them and ran down the stairs.

Out on the street he squinted despite the dark glasses. The sun was a pitiless brilliant yellow and made him realize how dark it was in the apartment. The Block appeared silent with an indolent summer afternoon silence. There were few people outside. It was just as well. He had nothing to say to them. The less people seeing him, the better he liked it. He caught sight of the cop who was guarding their house and they exchanged suspicious glances. He didn't know whether the cop recognized him or not. Hell, a guy had a right to go out!

Johnnie started toward the Paradise Bar. He walked slowly, favoring his left foot, feeling gratified that it was holding up. "Gus should know," he thought, "where a guy can get a gun."

His eyes darted in all directions as he walked. Though it was broad and naked daylight, he was alert to every strange face, every car that appeared to hesitate before plunging headlong down the street. He saw his own car and his mind registered the fact that both its front tires were deflated. Should have put it in the garage a long time ago, maybe do it later . . . have Genaro fix the tires. Hell, you can never tell, might need it. He didn't need it now. Only a few hundred feet separated him from the Paradise Bar but it appeared to him now as a vast no-man's-land and he toyed with the fantastic idea that at any moment he would come across those lovable little signs the Germans used to put up for their own troops: *Achtung Minen*; though the one that had exploded in his face near the Po Valley, he remembered, had had no sign at all. He heard the calliope start suddenly and felt his heart leap. *Madonna!* In combat a man got twenty percent overseas pay for

doing less than this! His muscles were taut, on the point of bursting.

He entered the bar, slid onto a stool near the door, thought of ordering a whiskey but changed his mind and decided on a beer. The place appeared strange to him, much more strange that it had appeared after a three-year absence overseas. Then, in 1945, he had walked in and smashed his palm on the bar and ordered a beer. He had felt in that instant as if he had never been away. It puzzled him that he should feel different about it now.

"Hey! Look who's here!" the bartender cried. "The man himself!" He was short, round, with iron-grey hair neatly combed in the center, and thick lips. He waddled like a duck but his hands were quick and dextrous.

Johnnie turned on the stool, jaws clamped tight, his eyes flicking from one face to another. There were about twelve of them at the bar, he observed, and two more sat at a table, their faces blurred by the darkness of the place. None of his friends was there; it didn't matter, this was not a social call. It occurred to him that one or two men at the bar smiled at him, but he wasn't sure. He stared at them blankly in return. He trusted none of them, even those among them he knew vaguely, having seen them at the bar in the past. There was no way of telling: his enemies might be total strangers or men who lived in the neighborhood, perhaps even in The Block. That was the damnable part of it: you felt as if you were taking on the whole world.

"A beer," he said.

Gus nodded. "Coming up."

Johnnie let his eyes wander over the place as if he were seeing it for the first time. The record player in the middle of the bar was grating out a popular song, winking red,

blue and yellow as it played. The walls of the bar were covered with action photos of Joe DiMaggio, Babe Ruth, Rizzuto and others of Italian extraction who had made their mark in the world of sport. Under a sign, Honor Roll, were the names and photos of men in The Block who had been in the war, himself among them. A brand new sign, lettered in black, proclaimed: *Join The Block in celebrating St. Rocco's Day.*

The bartender waddled over, carrying a glass of beer. Sweat bubbles danced on his upper lip. "Long time no see." His beady eyes took in Johnnie's attempt at disguise and his voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper: "Hear you been having some trouble."

"Some," Johnnie said, tasting the pleasant cool foam rather than the beer itself, his eyes alive to every move around him.

The bartender as if sensing his concern said in a low tone of voice: "You don't have to worry about the guys in here. I know each and every one of 'em."

"What makes you think I'm worried?"

"I'm just telling you."

He found himself listening to the voice, not the words; the gravel quality of the voice was so like the ones he used to hear over the phone. Could this bastard be one of them? He was instantly ashamed of his suspicion; they were old pals, he and Gus, ten years or more. He drained his beer.

"Another one?"

"No. Look." He seized the bartender's wrist, drew him closer. "I want to talk to you, Gus, private."

"What about?" the bartender asked, perplexed, withdrawing his arm.

"Private . . . in the office," Johnnie said.

The office was crowded with metal beer barrels, Johnnie

took a deep breath, his nostrils tingling with the strong scent of malt. He waited until Gus closed the door. "Look—" he hesitated and his face shed its sickly pallor for a deep crimson. He saw no point beating around the bush. "I need . . . well, I need a gun." The words tumbled out of his mouth and he felt better.

"Why come to me?" Gus questioned.

"I had a hunch you—"

"Your hunches are no damn *buono*," Gus retorted. "You had a hunch about Minelli too, and see where it got you! I ain't got no gun. I gave up shootin' irons fifteen years ago."

"I didn't think you had one," Johnnie explained hurriedly. "But you might know where I can get one."

"Well, I *don't*."

"Look, Gus," Johnnie cried, seizing the bartender by the arms. "You've got to do me this favor. I need one."

Gus freed himself and retreated. "What good is a gun to you?" he demanded. "A gun is no good lest you mean to use it. You know who your enemy is?"

"Probably Minelli's goons," Johnnie replied, "but it makes no difference. Last time I got caught with nothing more than a godamn shoehorn in my pocket. If I'd had a gun—"

"You woulda plugged him," Gus finished the sentence for him. "And you woulda been up on charges of homicide, to say nothing about violation of the Sullivan Law. Ain't you got enough trouble now?"

"I'll pay, Gus. I've got the dough with me."

"I know you will, in more ways than one," Gus said, casting a worried glance at his unattended bar.

"What do you say?"

"I told you I gave up shootin' irons fifteen years ago."

"What will it take?" Johnnie persisted.

"Hey, won't you let up? You got me cut up and bleeding now." He considered Johnnie's pained expression and suddenly he felt sorry for him. "I guess we got you into this," he said after a pause.

"Got me into what?" Johnnie asked, startled.

"To snitch on Minelli."

"What are you talking about?"

"The night before you spilled the beans—" the bartender said. "I watched you the night before you did it. Everybody was saying how there was rumors about Minelli being in town, what a sonofabitch he was, and how they'd turn him in if they knew where he was hanging out. You didn't say a word. But you were squirming on that stool like a guy with a poker up his whoozis. I watched you. I could tell you knew where that bastard Minelli was hiding and I knew you'd talk." He wiped his lips and spat on the sawdust.

"What's that got to do with now?" Johnnie asked.

"I shoulda stopped you then," Gus declared. He paused, rubbed his stubbly chin: "How much dough you got?"

"Fifty," Johnnie said readily. He had taken the money from the grocery bag left by Sciortino several evenings ago; he knew even then for what purpose he would use the money.

"That might do it," the bartender said thoughtfully.

"Where do I go?"

"Anderson's Oyster Shack, near the river. Ask for Scotty. Tell him—" he hesitated for an instant, "tell him I said it was okay."

Johnnie reached into his back pocket where the bills were rolled up, held fast by a rubber band. "How much for your trouble, Gus?"

"You ain't got it yet," he said. "If you do, you'll buy me a beer next time." He grinned, showing large yellow teeth. "If there's going to be a next time."

"'Preciate it," Johnnie said, shaking the bartender's hand.

Outside the bar he hailed a cab, hopped in and told the driver where to let him off. The driver nodded, then pivoted in his seat. Their eyes met and Johnnie wondered: "What's he looking at?" The car raced down The Block and Johnnie found himself sitting on the edge of the seat studying the little framed snapshot giving the driver's name and number: Richard Novak. The name meant nothing to Johnnie. The face? The faces on all these snapshots looked as if they had been photographed in prison.

The cab made a sharp left turn on Bush Avenue and Johnnie grabbed the cloth flap and held on.

They shot down the length of the avenue and he finally sat back in his seat. He was conscious of each and every move he was making. "Combat fatigue," he thought dolefully. "Be damned if you don't have it." Overseas when a man went to pieces, that's what they called it, combat fatigue. In his own squad it was Binky the Nevadan who had it. They shipped Binky to Naples to get away from it all. "That's what they ought to do to you," he thought. In Naples a man took the cure drinking cheap *vino* in the Galleria and shacking up with a *signorina* he'd picked up on Via Roma. At least, while in Naples, he was away from the long cry of shells. "Where does a fellow go here?" he wondered.

Near the river, Johnnie got off a block from his destination, paid the driver and started walking toward the Oyster Shack. He caught sight of the river, its placid, oily surface

worried into ripples by a pot-bellied tug. A small banana ship was dozing in the late afternoon heat, a huge crane probing its insides with sharp iron claws. The sun was a yellow-white ball of fire and he squinted each time he raised his eyes to peer suspiciously at passersby.

He walked in and asked for Scotty.

"Not here," the man behind the counter said. The tall, dirty chef's cap was perched over his nose. One of his eyes was hidden completely, while the other, a round, frightful object, fastened on Johnnie like a glaring spotlight.

"Have any idea when he'll be here?"

"Later, maybe."

"I'll wait around," Johnnie said.

"Suit yourself."

Johnnie ordered a cup of coffee and sat down at the small, marble-topped table, his back to the wall. "Safer here than prowling around outside," he thought. With his back to the wall he had a thorough view of the place. He could watch the customers come in and out. There was only one thing wrong; he was a mile away from the entrance. It would take him a lifetime to reach the door if he had to run. However, his knee took care of that eventuality. He realized he couldn't run if he had to; the darn thing wouldn't hold up. He sat back and lit a cigarette. There was some small consolation in knowing what you could and couldn't do. You sat back and said to yourself relax, easy does it, nothing you can do about it anyway . . .

It was almost dark when Scotty finally appeared, wearing the grey clothes and cap of a dock-walloper. His hands were knotted and strong, but his face had a soft, pink, effeminate quality and a squeaky voice that matched that face to perfection.

"Fella to see you," the man behind the counter said, turning his spotlight of an eye in Johnnie's direction.

"Me?" Scotty said, grinning coquettishly. "Who'd wanna see *me*?"

Fifteen minutes later Johnnie walked out of a dark warehouse, a forty-five in his pocket. Scotty had thrown in a pouch of bullets with it and took the roll of fifty from Johnnie for his troubles. The clumsy, bulky army pistol weighed a ton in his pocket, but its bulkiness reassured him. He walked hurriedly, conscious of the swiftly gathering darkness. The evening hurled its quilt of blackness over the dock area and Johnnie peered suspiciously at the warehouse doors. Near Palmer Avenue he scrambled inside a cab and gave the driver his home address. Then he leaned back on the hard seat and lit a cigarette. Now he could relax. Now he felt good. He wasn't afraid. The gun warmed him and gave him a feeling of power. Tomorrow . . .

He was suddenly aware of glaring lights smudging the rear window. He turned sharply and saw a shiny sedan, black and sleek, bearing down on them. "Step on it, driver!"

"What's your hurry, mac?" He half turned his head, saw the glare in his rear window, the gun in Johnnie's hand. "Okay, you're the boss." His foot jammed on the gas. The cab vibrated shudderingly and spurted ahead.

Johnnie released the safety catch, his index finger touching the smooth trigger. His mind leaped back to other eternities such as this, when his index finger had stroked a trigger, waiting, waiting, while the universe seemed to be holding its breath. They swerved onto Bush Avenue, raced up the hill. The rear window was suddenly dark

again. They rode in silence for a while, then Johnnie moved cautiously toward the window and looked out. There wasn't a car anywhere within fifty feet of them.

"Okay, driver, you can slow her down a little."

"Be glad to. Mind, eh, doing me a favor? Put your gun away. Makes me nervous."

"You and me both," Johnnie said, slumping in his seat.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ONLY WHEN HE STARTED UP THE STAIRS did Johnnie become aware of the excruciating pain in his left knee. He had ignored the pain all afternoon, had almost forgotten about it while streaking home in the cab, had paid no attention to it as he drove his own car into Genaro's garage where he left it. He had been too busy to think about pain, too many things on his mind. Now the pain shot violently through his body as if reminding him that his work for the day was done. He wanted only to get to his bed, to be left alone to drown his pain, to nurse his fatigue and then to plan his next move. But as soon as he opened the door and entered the apartment, both his mother and Peggy hurled themselves at him, screaming hysterically. Their screams came as if from a distance and he tried to shake them off gently and walk to his bed where he might lie down before he collapsed on the floor.

"Where were you?"

"Half the police department . . . searching all over the city for you."

He heard himself mumbling incoherent excuses. He limped across the living room, saw his father standing in the corner like a shrunken mummy, reached his bed and lay down. The two women pursued him to his bedroom, their hysteria now replaced by a whimpering concern for his inflamed knee.

He heard their whispers, the shuffling feet, saw them dimly over his bed, was conscious of the needling ice cubes on his hot flesh. He was sleepy and it occurred to him it was probably the fever that moved with a crushing weight over his eyelids. He closed his eyes, opened them with difficulty, and saw Peggy sitting on his bed. Her hand was surprisingly cool in his own moist palm.

"Where's Ma?" he articulated slowly. Even his own voice appeared distant to him as if it were wandering around in the next room.

"They went to sleep . . . two hours ago."

"Oh—" He didn't know it was so late. Must have been dozing. "Time is it?"

"Little after midnight," she replied. She was tired and her eyelids were only half open. The black dress she wore appeared tight on her. Her breasts were no longer those of an adolescent.

"Why didn't you go home?"

"Thought I'd hang around."

"Glad," he said, the corners of his lips forming into a smile. "Wanna talk to you."

"Tomorrow will be time enough," she said. "Get some sleep now."

He was terribly and overpoweringly sleepy. His eyelids were on fire. "No, not tomorrow. Now." He felt he had to talk to her; he had to tell her. Somehow he had to tell her, without frightening her, that he had bought a gun . . . that the initiative was now his, not the enemy's. He was done retreating and hiding. The Block had let him down, but that was okay with him now that he had a gun. His mouth felt parched, dry. "We won't put it off—" he said, almost in a whisper. "Tomorrow we'll go and get it over with."

"Do what?" she asked, watching the moist sheen on his cheekbones.

"Married," he replied. "Should have done it a long time ago. Had no business putting it off . . . My own fault . . . Gotta do it right away, first thing in the morning."

"Sure, Johnnie. First thing in the morning. Now go to sleep."

"Lotsa unfinished business," he murmured. "Like I said, my own fault. Gotta get back on the ball. Be married first thing—pick up reward money, find something to do. Get a job . . . I don't care about Cosmo any more. Still like the merry-go-round but don't care about Cosmo. It'll have to be a job. Move out of The Block. To hell with The Block . . . Can't depend on 'em. Depend only on your gun." He opened his eyes with effort and saw the questioning look on her face.

"What are you talking about?"

He felt a tremor as she removed her hand. "Manner of speaking," he said slyly, "'at's all."

"The gun, I mean?" she asked suspiciously.

"Would be nice to have one," he said, chuckling. "Had one of 'em overseas. Liberated it from a frightened Kraut. A Luger pistol. Know what I did with it?" He paused for an instant as if waiting for her to question him. "Sold it in Naples on black market, got a basketful of *lire* for it." He paused again, shifted in bed as if trying to bring his faltering memory into focus. "Bought candy at the PX and walked down Via Roma handing it out to the kids. Too many kids. Broke your heart so many kids. Woulda been better off to keep the gun . . . in more ways than one."

He fell asleep and in the morning when he woke, she was still there, sitting by his bedside, her eyes closed, her shoulders sloping. The fever was gone from his eyes and

the pain radiating from his swollen knee was less annoying. He tried sitting up and saw her bolt into consciousness.

"Why didn't you go lie down on the couch?"

"That *thing* in your pocket," she said, ignoring his question, "what do you need it for?"

"Oh, *that*!"

"What do you need a gun for?"

He shrugged. Should have hidden the damned thing.

"What do you need it for?" she cried, enraged.

"Peggy, now—" He reached for her but she withdrew.

"What do you think you're gonna do with it! . . . You think I'll let you out of the house with that weapon? Just try! Just you try!"

"Peggy, be reasonable."

"You're not leaving the house! I'll see to it."

"And what about the—?"

"To hell with that!" she interrupted. "What good is marrying if you're gonna bring home a corpse!"

"Now, you listen to me."

She stormed out of the bedroom and slammed the door. She did not go to work that day nor on the following one. She spoke hardly at all to him. He heard her from his bedroom whispering constantly to his parents. He was certain that all three of them were plotting against him, particularly where his gun was concerned. He kept the gun in his pocket. Hardly any of them left the house now. They even took turns watching over him at night. The days raced on interminably, one day an echo of the previous one with one change apparent only to him; he thought Peggy was getting rounder in her belly and he wondered how long it would be before his parents noticed it. Now that he was able to get around the house with the aid of a

crutch, he slept on the hard living-room couch; Peggy slept in his bed.

Mama Constable sat up for hours, dozing in the chair, glancing stealthily at her sleeping son, then at the bedroom door as if wanting to make certain the young ones were doing nothing improper. She was a little ashamed of her suspicion and yet she could not help herself. One had to be stupid, she reflected, not to discern the hunger in their eyes, the liquid glances, the low whispers, the secretive ripples of laughter, and when she turned her back, the sudden fierce embraces. Even in the violent arguments that flared between the two of them she suspected a quality of love play. It made Mama Constable uneasy and ashamed to be part of the electrically charged atmosphere. The knowledge was a burden she longed to share with her husband, but he appeared to be off somewhere by himself, nursing his own private wounds and grievances. What shocked Mama Constable more than anything was that all of this should be happening while a constant threat was hanging over them. Their marriage, she decided, must be consummated soon. She had started with grandiose plans, had trimmed them, but now she was eager to settle for the briefest, simplest ceremony. But where does one go? To whom does one appeal for help?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THEY HEARD SOMEONE COMING up the stairs and Johnnie clutched at the pistol in his pocket. His heart leaped against his ribs. Lately sounds on the stairs came only at rare intervals and were a cause for suspicion. There was a knock on the door, followed by a high falsetto voice: "It's me, Mollinari."

The old man opened the door, wondering what had brought his tenant upstairs; Mollinari seldom came to see them. "Sit down," he said, pointing to a chair.

Mollinari ignored the invitation. "We're moving," he said, a note of anger in his voice as if the inconvenience caused him and his family was their fault.

"Moving?" the old man questioned, shocked. "But why? Is the service bad? I don't understand. You've been with us fifteen years. I never heard a complaint—"

"I'm sorry, I'm moving," the tenant said, maintaining his querulous tone of voice.

"But I'm entitled to notice."

"This is my notice."

"I don't accept. You can't!" the old man cried.

"I'm moving anyway."

"But why?"

"Because he's been told to!" Johnnie shouted, unable to control his anger.

"Nobody told me," Mollinari retorted. "I found a big-

ger place so I'm moving. I have a right. This is a free country."

"But what about the lease?" the old man wanted to know. "It doesn't expire till the end of the year. You signed it. You're an honorable man."

"I'll make a settlement on that," Mollinari said. "We won't come to blows about the money."

"I'll take you to court," the old man threatened.

"Pa, leave him alone," Johnnie said. What was the old man getting all steamed up about? "If he wants to move, let him move. Personally, I don't blame him. This house is no place to raise children. A man has a right to protect his family."

"That's so," Mollinari said, nodding. "Everybody has to look out for himself. The way things are going here, I can't take chances with my kids running around in front of the house. My wife is so nervous she hasn't slept a night in two weeks." He turned and faced Johnnie: "If you had gone away, like we said you should, maybe this wouldn't of happened." He wheeled around and left abruptly before Johnnie could marshal his thoughts for a reply.

The old man watched him go and sank in a chair, crest-fallen. "Last night," he whispered, "it was Sciortino." Sciortino had come, carrying a bag full of groceries, as usual, but with an expression on his face so grave and cold, it had frightened the old man. They had talked then of the past, of things men talked about whose friendship spanned half a lifetime, until they heard the final grinding effort of the calliope across the way and knew it was past midnight.

"I won't be coming for a while," Sciortino had said near the door, his hand on the knob.

"Why not, Dominic?" Mr. Constable had asked, surprised:

"This evening when I came home from work, my wife showed me this slip of paper. She found it in the mailbox . . . Here."

They had read it then:

Stay away from the Constable hous or youl git it too.

"You understand, Armando, if it wasn't for the children and my wife, I'd tell them to go to hell. At first I told my wife I wouldn't pay any attention to it. But she made such a scene, I had to promise."

"I understand," the old man had said, seizing the table for support. Those were the only words that had come to his mind and he had repeated them several times.

Now he remembered Sciortino's parting words: "Armando, I'm sorry. Maybe if Johnnie had gone away, like we said, things wouldn't turn out like this . . . Let's hope it will soon be over and it'll be the same as always."

"I'll spit in their faces!" the old man cried, his body shaking convulsively, his face ashen grey.

He went to bed and stayed there for days, refusing to get up. He chattered incoherently, wept, cursed loudly, then slept.

They listened to his cries and it occurred to Johnnie: "The old man is going off his nut." He was disappointed and bewildered by his father's emotional antics, but somehow he accepted them as the proper order of things. It was inevitable that it should lead to this. And it would become worse, he reasoned, unless he did something about it soon. "It's up to you!" he thought. "You got them into this. Now

do something." To hell with pride! There was no percentage staying on in the house, defending this cardboard fortress. What good was it? Where would it all lead to? The thing to do—there was only one thing to do—was to take Peggy and get out. While many things pertaining to their lives seemed in abeyance, Peggy's belly was governed by laws prevailing outside; it grew bigger and bigger. He glanced stealthily at her sitting nearby on the couch; she was cradling her belly in the palms of her hands. There was precious little time to waste.

Peggy caught his action and removed her hands from her belly as if she had been caught in the middle of a very personal reverie. She had been thinking, when she felt his eyes on her belly, about the old man crying in the bedroom, about Johnnie sitting near her, a loaded gun in his pocket, the drawn shades in the apartment, the cop pounding the pavement outside; she had been thinking about that and her own terrible guilt. If it hadn't been for her, she chastised herself, none of this would have happened. If she hadn't become pregnant . . . if she hadn't urged Johnnie to turn in Minelli . . . if she hadn't been seized by this panic . . . Whatever prompted her to act contrary to her beliefs? It puzzled her that she should not have been able to see through it.

All her life she had spouted the words *solid foundation* as if she were their discoverer; build on something solid, that's what she planned to do, not on quicksand. She supposed every girl said that at one time or another, sooner or later. But she had said it earlier than most. She had learned it not from words spoken, but from observing her own parents whose marriage was a heap of ruins because there was never enough, never had been enough, because her mother had married a man who inherited a coat of arms

(a River Bank Browne) but no ability to earn money. Even as a child Peggy had been certain she would not repeat her mother's mistake. Her marriage would have a solid foundation (at that time she visualized it as a heavily bedded-down cement platform with a superstructure, labeled *happiness*, rising above it). She would marry a man who had the capacity to earn. She would *not* marry under any other circumstances. Then what had prompted her to seize upon Minelli and the reward as a way out of their difficulties? Her own carelessness: the pregnancy

She had been thinking, too, of this strange and inexplicable (to her) feeling she had for the thing moving inside her. It occurred to her that she should want to rip the foetus out of her insides, drown it in blood, but instead she fondled it with words and cradled it with her hands. It appeared as if she were determined to shield it, to safeguard it, while everything else slid into ruin.

Suddenly Peggy seized his hands and pulled them down to her belly, flat against the abdomen and said, her eyes glistening: "Can you feel it?"

"No," he whispered, startled. "It's too early anyway."

"You're wrong," she said secretively, "it's not too early. I have been hearing it for a long time. I've been listening." And then she drew him toward her, her lips parted, the red irises of her eyes catching fire. He was on his feet, bewildered by her burst of passion, but she held on to his wrists and led him to his room, to his bed, and closed the door.

Mama Constable sat by her husband's bedside and listened to him chatter insanely. But her mind was elsewhere. Her mind was filled with thoughts of Johnnie. It occurred to her—and it was no longer speculation—if anything happened to the boy she would kill herself. She

could not, would not go on pretending . . . setting two places at the table for two sons dead. Doing it for one, Alfredo, was *almost* bearable. With one, she could pretend. But if they took the second one from her, she would kill herself. If Alfredo had married and his wife had borne a grandson there would not be such emptiness. If Johnnie were married and his wife bore a grandson . . .

"Dominic—" the old man articulated. "My fig tree is dying."

"Armando." She put her hand on his shoulder and shook him gently, but he did not respond.

"I must see Johnnie," he finally said.

"Why?"

"It's a secret," he whispered. "I know a secret place for him to hide. Call him. Johnnie!" he screamed.

"Now—" she stroked his hair gently, worried by his outburst. "Now. I'll call him." She walked into the living room and was surprised they were not on the couch where she had left them. She saw that Johnnie's door was closed and she stood near it momentarily, wondering whether she should knock or shout her message to him. She was startled by Peggy's soft voice: "Can you feel the baby—now?"

Mama Constable felt a shock going through her body. She withdrew her hand from the doorknob as if stung. She was on the point of taking flight but the soft, low whispers held her chained to the spot. She felt she would dissolve from shame. She felt she had to do something, do it in a hurry or she would be an accomplice—in the eyes of God. She heard her husband's incoherent chatter mingle with the soft, sweet whispers of the two lovers. It occurred to her she would never be able to walk the distance between the living room and the bedroom where Armando was car-

rying on; she was certain lightning would strike her down . . . She was surprised at the firmness of her step.

"Armando, stop acting like a child," she said, sitting down calmly near his bed. She folded her arms over her large bosom and sat there like a tragic stone figure. But if the old man had opened his eyes and gazed at her at a certain moment, he would have noted a tiny smile glowing in the corner of her mouth.

Mama Constable was up earlier than usual. She left the house noiselessly and locked the door as if that were a precaution against Johnnie's attempt at escape. They were still asleep when she returned carrying two large bags of groceries. She hid the purchases in the kitchen pantry and tiptoed noiselessly out of the house. She returned shortly before noon, marching into the apartment triumphantly, followed by three men. One of them was the young cop who walked up and down The Block, twirling the nightstick as if he were studying to become a juggler in a circus. The other was the neighborhood idiot who swept the merry-go-round and was called "Caruso" because he was always howling. Caruso was a harmless nitwit who was afraid of people and ran away when they came too close to him. There was a sad, bewildered look on his face as Mama Constable nudged him gently inside the living room. The third man, a total stranger, was of medium height, wore rimless glasses, had curly grey hair and the face of an adolescent.

"So these are the two who are getting married," the stranger said, grinning broadly as if something had struck him very funny. The grin was followed by a ripple of laughter that winged through the rooms like a lost bird.

"Fine thing," he said, undaunted by the gloomy expressions on the faces around him. "Fine thing."

Johnnie opened his mouth, was on the point of saying something, then snapped it shut. The man impressed him as a lunatic. What did the lunatic want of him?

"This is Mr. Binetti," Mama Constable finally introduced the stranger, "justice of the peace."

"Glad to meecha," Mr. Binetti barked. "Shall we get going?"

Slowly it dawned on Johnnie what was happening, what was required of him. He did not find out until later that his mother had practically kidnaped the justice of the peace from his home, had carried him to their house in a taxi after explaining to him why it must be done in this manner. Downstairs, she had induced the policeman to leave his beat "for a little while," then, running across the lot, she had grabbed Caruso and dragged him up the stairs.

"Shall we get going?" Mr. Binetti repeated, rubbing his hands and smacking his palms as if he were still trying to dispel the heavy gloom. "Let's pull up the shades!" he cried. "Let a little sunshine in! What is this? A funeral or a wedding?" He laughed and slapped Johnnie on the shoulder. "Taking the plunge, eh, boy? Best thing for you. Nothing like settling down and leading the regular life, I always say."

Johnnie nodded. "Here's the marriage license," he said.

Mr. Binetti took the license, read it expertly, casting sidelong glances at Peggy who was flitting in and out of the room, brushing her sandy-colored hair, applying make-up to her face. "What a *sight* I am!" she cried. Mama Constable roused the old man out of bed. He refused at first, but when she told him what the occasion was, he bounded off the bed and insisted on putting on his stiff

white shirt and black holiday tie. In the living room the cop fidgeted nervously, running a finger inside his shirt collar, parting the curtains in the room, gazing worriedly at the street below. "Can we kind of speed it up?" he queried sheepishly.

Mr. Binetti nodded eagerly. He took out a black watch and placed it on the table. The watch had an alarm that rang once a minute. He had acquired the watch many years ago when he worked at city hall as marriage clerk. The watch had enabled him to allot no more than one minute to each couple. It was more habit than necessity that prompted Mr. Binetti to resort to the timepiece now. "Principals!" he called. "Witnesses!"

The young cop and Caruso lined up behind the bride and groom. Mama Constable, her face flushed, took her place near Johnnie, while the old man, still fingering his tie, stood next to Peggy.

Mr. Binetti glanced at his watch and pulled the alarm. Suddenly his eye wandered to the bride's face and he put the watch abruptly in his pocket.

It was a strange marriage that united Peggy Browne and Johnnie Constable, but it was a proper, lawful marriage. Even the idiot, Caruso, was imbued with the solemnity of the occasion, his dim eyes fixed on the ceiling. Mama Constable cast a furtive glance at Alfredo's picture on the wall. It was not the marriage she had planned. Mr. Binetti spoke in a slow, sonorous voice as if he were determined, in this last attempt, to rout the black gloom.

After the brief ceremony Mama Constable invited the justice of the peace and the two witnesses to stay for supper.

"Gotta run along," Mr. Binetti said. "Wish I could stay, but can't. Best of luck."

The cop and Caruso also declined. She ran to the kitchen and wrapped some pastry in napkins and gave each one of them a portion. "It's an old Italian custom," she said. She watched them go, returned to the kitchen, closed the door and started cooking supper.

Johnnie looked out the window in the living room and saw the cop who had resumed his beat in front of the house as if nothing had happened. The Block was deserted, more than usual. Where were they, his pals, his buddies, all those who gave him that fine, shiny silver cap for his knee? *They* were hiding, not he! He leaned his weight consciously on his knee and, although it pained, he was glad to note that it held him up. It occurred to him that even while the ceremony had been in progress, his mind had been elsewhere, thinking of escape, worrying whether Peggy would agree, how his parents would react, whether his knee would hold up, if the patched tubes in the front tires of his car would last. Would Genaro have the car in front of the house when he wanted it? And *where, where* the hell was he going? You had to have a place to go! It wouldn't do to exchange this place for Peggy's rooming house, for instance. What would prevent his enemies from pursuing him there? He had to go somewhere, away from here, where he could shake them. But godammit, where? His thoughts were interrupted by Mama Constable who came in from the kitchen with a snow-white cloth which she put on the dining-room table. He watched her place the silverware on the cloth, then the sparkling glasses, and he marveled at the way she seemed absorbed by her task, just as in the old days when the table had been the focal point of their lives. He saw her hesitate over Alfredo's chair. Finally she picked up the plate and silverware she had set for her dead son and put them aside. She smiled at Peggy

who was helping her and said: "We will set for four."

It was evening when they finally took their places at the table. Mama Constable brought in rich antipasto, followed by sea food, roast chicken, star-shaped ravioli, spaghetti with thick brown sauce, green salad and several kinds of imported Italian cheeses.

"*Madonna!*" the old man exclaimed after downing his second glass of wine. He looked like a scarecrow, thin, gaunt, his face tinted yellow. "*Madonna*, we've let them scare us, the enemy, I mean. They've taken the initiative. We must reclaim it." He was grasping the wine glass in his large fist and his eyes were on the potent red liquid which gave him this wild burst of courage. "We must reclaim it," he said, speaking for the benefit of his new daughter-in-law. "Nobody has ever won a campaign without initiative. I was at Caporetto, I know." He smiled at Peggy; he liked her. She was the type that listened.

"Eat, Armando," Mama Constable said. "Leave your campaigns for later."

"You keep out of this, woman," he said, annoyed. "Attend to your cooking." He cast a bold glance at Johnnie and said: "I feel I'm getting on my feet again. Now maybe we'll plan a little surprise for them, eh, John?"

"Sure, Pa," Johnnie said, twirling spaghetti on his fork, "we'll ask for unconditional surrender."

"I'm serious, boy."

"Anything else would be a compromise of principles."

"We'll arouse The Block," the old man cried, undaunted by the cynicism. "I'll do it myself. Can't depend on the others. I'll go from house to house . . . Then to the societies and churches. I'll lead them to the mayor. I'll say, look here, your honor, a grave injustice is being done . . . in your own city in broad daylight a man is being kept im-

prisoned in a house, threatened with death. Everybody knows about it, but nobody lifts a finger to do anything . . . I'll put it to him straight: are we human, I will ask, or are we beasts living in a jungle? What are you going to do about it, Mr. Mayor? What's your answer?"

There was a brief pause, then Johnnie said, amused: "You got hizzoner practically on the ropes, Pa."

"I don't see what strikes you so funny," the old man pouted.

"Okay, I'm sorry. It's just that . . . that you're singing the same old tune, Pa. Change it. Nobody gives a damn. And even if they did give a damn, they're too scared to do anything about it. It's each guy for himself. That's the way you have to figure it, Pa."

"You can't, John, it's wrong, wrong." He looked from one to the other, his eyes beseeching them to understand what for him had always been the simple truth. "Where would any of us be, in this block, I mean, if we hadn't helped each other?"

He waited for their answer and finally Mama Constable reminded him: "Armando, this is a wedding feast."

He nodded in Peggy's direction with a gallant bow of his head. "I know, I know . . . At a wedding one should be happy. At my own wedding I sang *Donne ê Mobile* until I was hoarse." He drank some wine, smacked his lips. "I remember particularly the end of the wedding," he chuckled. "The guests had all gone home and only the immediate family remained. My in-laws escorted us to a bedroom where they were going to lock us in for the night. Before they did that, though, they instructed us that it must be a *son*. Next morning my mother-in-law examined the bed sheets for stains. She wanted to make sure she had given me a virgin. I—"

There was a loud crash, followed by a shower of glass. They crept into the living room and examined the wreckage. Where the window had been there was a jagged, gaping hole. Johnnie ran to the window, releasing the safety catch of his pistol with a loud click. The street was dark, deserted, silent.

"Johnnie, get away from there." He felt Peggy's hands on his shoulders and pushed her away. He heard his parents pleading, begging him to take cover, but he paid no attention to them. "Come out, you bastards!" he bellowed at the deserted street. Why didn't they show their faces? Not even a shadow moving in the night . . . If he saw even a shadow he would fire at it. And then he heard himself shouting hysterically, challenging the silent street which was like a vast conspiracy. "Come out! Come and get me, you mother-violating bastards—" He parted the drapes and stood there cursing and challenging them to come out. Then he felt Peggy's arms around his throat. Suddenly he squeezed the trigger and fired blindly at the vast, black nothingness. The explosion shattered the night silence and he stood there listening to the echo, waiting; waiting for the enemy, whoever he was, to take up the challenge; waiting for The Block and the world beyond it to take cognizance of his anger and impotence; waiting, letting the indifferent ones and the frightened ones know that he, John Constable, was still among them and that he would not let them forget that he was still among them . . . But the only response, the only reply to his outraged summons, was the snapping of the stars overhead.

Exhausted, he let them lead him from the window. Peggy was kissing his face, his eyes, emitting little cries of endearment. But there wasn't anything he could offer in return. He felt as if everything had been drained out of

him. He wanted only to cry . . . to be able to cry . . . to wrap his arms around a solid object and . . . A picture flashed in his mind: himself as a boy, his arms wrapped around the throat of Yankee Clipper, crying bitterly as they whirled through space. He seized his wife and buried his face in her shoulder, but the only sounds escaping his throat were dry, tortured sobs.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE CAR WAS IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE, Genaro having left it there at Mama Constable's request. The street lights had been lit some time ago.

"Come on, Peg," Johnnie said impatiently. She would be late to her own funeral. He glanced at his parents who stood near the door, forlorn. It had been this way since early morning when he had announced his intention to flee. He had expected obstacles, particularly on the part of his mother, but they had finally acquiesced. They had seen it his way, realizing that there was nothing else to be done; he couldn't go on hiding in a cellar the rest of his life, nor could they go on living in the shadow of fear; he would go somewhere, leave the state if necessary, make a new start. But even now as he watched the women embrace and weep, he hadn't the slightest idea of their destination. What made it even more difficult was Peggy's insistence on going along.

"You'll hear from us," he said near the door. "We'll let you know."

They started down the stairs and Johnnie heard his mother admonishing them: "Be careful, please—" For a brief instant his mind raced back to a time overseas where sitting waist-deep in a water-logged foxhole he would open a letter from his mother and read: "Johnnie, don't forget to put on your wool socks—"

The Mollinari apartment on the first floor was vacant, the window black and shut. Across the street a cop with a night stick in his hand was eyeing them suspiciously. In the distance Johnnie caught sight of the merry-go-round circling lazily, smoothly on its assigned course. His eyes darted nervously to the middle of The Block where a window was being shut. At the far corner he saw a shadow plunge across the street and merge with the dark.

"Come on." He nudged her toward the car. He poked a finger at the front tires; they were firm. Peggy gazed up and down the street, waiting for Johnnie to unlock the car. He opened the door and both of them were struck by the heat imprisoned inside. Johnnie slid under the wheel, fingered the key and inserted it in the ignition. He pressed on the starter and the motor made a rattling noise, changing almost instantly into a loud roar. He side-glanced at Peggy as if he were apologizing for the motor's noises that reverberated the length of the empty street.

"Have any idea," she whispered, "where we are going?"

He nodded. He had only a vague idea. He had told her about it earlier in the day, but she either forgot or hadn't bothered to listen. Not that it mattered, he thought. One place was as good as another. The important thing was to get away.

He let out the clutch too rapidly and the car lurched forward. His plan was to turn down Bush Avenue, cross the bridge and head for the Turnpike. He felt confident once they reached the Turnpike and its six wide-open lanes, they would have a good chance of escaping. The Chevvy was old, but she was peppery. He had only the vaguest idea what they would do after that. "Put on some mileage," he said, "stop somewhere for the night, then figure the next move—"

He waited for a comment but she said nothing. She sat forward in the seat, her shoulders sloping as if they were aiding her arms to shield completely her belly.

"Sit back," he said, aware of her tension.

"I'm okay." She looked at him, smiled faintly and turned her face to the windshield.

"I know," he said softly. Their hands touched briefly and he turned off Parsons Street.

They were a half block down Perry when Johnnie realized that they were being followed. A car in back of them was blinking its lights furiously. He pressed on the accelerator and the Chevvy responded with a burst of speed. He glanced at the mirror. The car in back of him was creeping up. At the corner of Haskell, near the church, he eased his foot off the gas. A thought flashed in his mind: "Maybe somebody is trying to pass. Give him a chance." But even as this thought occurred to him, he reached frenziedly into his coat pocket, drew out his gun and dropped it on his lap after releasing the safety catch.

"Johnnie—what are you going to . . .?" The other car was abreast of them and Johnnie caught sight of two dark male figures in the front seat, one of them, the one sitting at the open window, holding a gun in his hand. Johnnie slammed his foot on the gas and both cars raced down Haskell Street.

"Pull over!"

He heard the words distinctly. Momentarily he was startled by this strange ultimatum and the string of curses that he flung back at them. His foot was now touching the floor and he twisted to the right to avoid colliding with his pursuers. The car rocked crazily, hurtled down the street. He saw Bush Avenue in the distance where he would have to make a left turn in order to get to the

bridge. He was creeping up toward Bush. "It's gonna be a sharp turn!" he warned Peggy. "Hold—"

"Johnnie! Watch out!"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw them on his left. It was as if they'd read his intentions and meant to prevent his reaching the bridge.

"Oh, you—!" They would smash into him if he tried making that turn. He looked forlornly at Peggy whose eyes dilated with terror, and twisted the wheel to the right. It was goodbye bridge, goodbye Turnpike. "Where to now?" he thought desperately. "Only one thing to do: keep going. Try to figure something out after you shake 'em." The gun was now in his hand. A wild, bitter rage suddenly took possession of him, and he was conscious of easing his foot off the accelerator as if he were waiting for his pursuers to come close again where he could see them and bring his gun to bear. He heard himself screaming at Peggy, admonishing her to duck. He swerved to the right again and caught sight of the merry-go-round. There was no getting away from it, no escaping it. It announced its presence with a thousand blurred lights. He heard an explosion and pulled Peggy down on the seat. Then a hissing sound. His car lurched to the left, the wheel balked and he almost lost control of it.

"One of the rear tires—" he cried.

"What now?" Her question appeared suspended in the air, then drowned out by the calliope.

Ahead of him he saw The Block hurtling into view. He slammed on the brakes and felt a sharp pain radiating from the trick knee through his body. The gun was in his hand, his index finger on the trigger. Now he was waiting for them. Now he was finished with running. He leaned over, opened the door and pushed her violently out of the

car. "Beat it!" he screamed, waving the pistol, pointing toward The Block. She obeyed without uttering a word of protest. She seemed to be propelled as much by the violence of his words as the thrust of his hands. There was a shot from another direction and Johnnie saw a cop running toward them, gun in hand.

"Godamn you!" Johnnie bellowed. "You sonofabitch flatfoot!" He slumped in the seat, tears in his eyes. He knew, even without turning, that his pursuers had gone. It required a great deal of effort to hide his forty-five from the cop. He felt suddenly drained and wrung out.

"Aren't you . . . ?" The cop's head was framed in the open window.

"Constable," Johnnie articulated slowly.

"Aren't you the guy that was married yesterday?"

"Me all right," Johnnie replied in a disembodied tone of voice.

"I was one of your witnesses," the cop said.

"So you were. Much obliged. 'Preciate it."

The officer put one foot on the running board. "What happened?" He swung his thumb in the direction where the car had disappeared.

"Well, it was like this, officer," Johnnie said, summoning words out of the depth of his misery, "my wife and I were starting out on our honeymoon—"

"And . . . ?"

"And here we are, back where we started from."

"Got any ideas who was chasing you?"

"They more than chased me. There's a bullet in one of my rear tires."

"Got any ideas who it was?"

"Have you? Your department has been having hot clues ever since this thing started. I'm only the guy they're after."

"If you'll take my advice," the cop said with sudden severity, "you'll stay upstairs."

"Sure, officer, and you'll protect me!" Johnnie retorted bitterly. "In a couple of days they'll pull you off this beat and it'll start all over again."

"What do you expect me to do?" the cop asked, perplexed.

"Why didn't you mind your own business!" Johnnie cried. "Why did you have to come running with that gun of yours?" He felt tears choking in his throat and moved quickly away from the wheel. The lights on the merry-go-round appeared as if they were weeping. He grabbed Peggy by the arm and they started walking toward the house. He gazed up and saw the broken living-room window and the drapes flapping through the hole.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JOHNNIE FOUND SEVERAL WOODEN PLANKS in the crowded cellar and nailed them over the hole in the living room where the window had been. His mother arranged the torn drapes over the ugly boards as if trying to restore some semblance of normalcy. She swept up the broken glass and then went to work cleaning and dusting her beloved objects: the picture frames, the artificial flowers, antimacassars, the cushions Johnnie had sent her while in the service, inscribed, To the sweetest Mom in the world. She put the objects back in their proper places, avoiding looking at the window as if she were determined not to let it upset the long-established pattern of her life. And Johnnie, watching her curiously, wondered why she was taking the trouble. He remembered with something of a shock that he had done similar things while in combat; that he too would scramble to put things back in order after an enemy attack. With him, just as with his mother, it was an act of defiance, an act of asserting that life was stronger than death, that people survived only when they tried to assert life. Overseas he did these things without effort or any attempt to analyze their meaning. He never considered himself courageous for it, though he recalled now how puzzled he would be by those of his buddies who gave themselves over to despair and sat back among the rubble and the ruins as if they were waiting for death. He saw it

now in the contrasting attitudes of his parents. While his mother was struggling to restore a semblance of normalcy, his father went back to his refuge in the bedroom where he lay with his eyes shut as if expecting to be summoned by the icy hand of death. Reflecting on this matter, Johnnie wasn't quite certain which one of his parents was the more realistic. At the moment he considered his mother's preoccupation sheer folly. What was the purpose of it all? Who was she tidying up for? Was she expecting allies? Did she think the world gave a good godamn? In this battle they were alone, forsaken, abandoned. The only question in his mind was what could be salvaged, thrown overboard, rescued. He found himself staring at his wife who sat across the room, cradling her belly in her hand protectively.

"Peggy," he began, shifting uneasily in his chair, "that room downtown, can you get it back?"

"What do you mean?" she said, startled.

"Look, let's not beat around the bush!" he flared up. "You know damn well what I mean. If you want me to spell it out for you, I mean this: you gotta get out of this house. You gotta take a powder. I want you out of here."

"We've just *been* and we just *came back*. I'm staying put."

"You're getting out of here. You're—"

"And *you*?" she interrupted, her eyes flashing angrily.

"Me?" The question surprised him. "It looks like *I'll* have to hang around a little while longer. You heard what the cop said downstairs."

"Then I'll hang around too."

"You'll go," Mama Constable said. "You'll go, like Johnnie says."

Peggy shook her head vehemently. "Not without him," she said.

"He'll come later," Mama Constable said. "You go back to your room down town and wait for him there. Better still, go away from the city for a while. The farther you will be from here, the better."

"I'll go to the moon!" she cried. "And you'll ship him to me—with a bullet in his head! Are you handing out guarantees that he'll come? I want him where I can touch him and see him. Then I don't care what happens."

He waited till her fury spent itself. He had not expected such violent reaction from her. He saw that her lower lip was trembling, and there was a high flush on her cheeks. "The way I see it," he said, pitching his voice low as if he were afraid of arousing her wrath again, "your chances of getting away are better if you leave without me. When you're safely out of the way, I'll make a break too. Follow me?" He felt his mother's eyes on him, but she said nothing. "Once we're out of this rat trap, we can figure our next move."

"And so can they," she said, referring to the unseen enemy.

"Look, baby," he pleaded, "what choice have we got? We aren't calling the plays, somebody else is. We're stuck, and soon there won't even be money for food. And *you* have to take care of yourself," he said obliquely, referring to her pregnancy.

Mama Constable nodded. She was grateful to her son for his obliqueness which spared her sensibilities. "You get ready," she said, looking with concern at her daughter-in-law's belly as if to make sure that the swelling was still there. "I'll go with you."

"But I gave up my room," Peggy said lamely.

"We'll find another one," Mama Constable replied. "It will only be for a little while."

She fought back savagely. She said she would not go without him, there would be no peace for her so long as he was here with a gun trembling in his hand. But she knew, even while she fought with them, that she would go. She would go back to the rooming house, she said, but under no circumstances would she leave the city. They embraced fiercely, a cry, long suppressed, escaped her lips. Then she started down the stairs, followed by Mama Constable who carried a small suitcase. He waited until they had gone, until the echo of shoes clop-clopping on the pavement died. He locked the door and started pacing the floor madly.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DOWN IN THE STREET the neighbors were stringing up light bulbs for the celebration of the feast of St. Rocco, the patron saint of all Italians. The feast day came in August but the festivities in The Block sometimes lasted a week.

Armando Constable could hear them from his refuge on the bed. In the past, for as many years as he was able to remember, he had helped with plans and arrangements, and only three years ago he had been honored with the title of Grand Marshal and walked at the head of the parade.

He could hear them now, and in a way he was grateful that The Block was coming back to life, that it was not, after all, a wilderness. He visualized how the lights would sparkle in the evening, the merry dancing in the street, the fine singing, and the loud banter, and the good, strong food. And he saw them marching: the Sons of Rocco, Sons of Little Italy, the men from the Garibaldi clubs, and even the oldsters from his own Italian Social and Athletic Club whose only athletic activities consisted of playing *bocce* in the school yard.

He rolled over on the bed and closed his eyes. They would have themselves a happy, wild time, he thought, and he was surprised how little he envied them. Theirs, he reasoned, was such a small preoccupation in the face of

what was happening to *him* and his family. The feverish preparations, the clatter and hubbub seemed to him absurd. What was all the shouting about? He wished they would make less noise. He wanted only to be left alone, to dissolve in long sleep. He was tired, very tired, and his old, stiff bones ached. He was tired of torturing himself, attempting to puzzle out where he had erred, where he had gone off the beaten path, what he had done wrong for this misfortune to befall him. In what way was he, Armando, different from all those who would march in the parade and enjoy the nearness of their fellowmen?

Armando Constable—Constab~~le~~ they called him then—came to the United States in 1922. He came with his young wife, Mariannina, and a two-year-old boy, Alfredo, who was thin and frail and would soon wear glasses. In Ellis Island where he saw hundreds of his countrymen and men of other lands clamoring for admission, they pinned a tag on his lapel with his name and destination on it, and ferried them across to the great stone city whose peaks fingered the sky. Almost before he had a chance to shake the sea spray off his clothes, he was given work as a bricklayer. Back in his native Lecce he had been a pharmacist, a man with a clean though frayed white collar, a respected man who knew the inside of a book. But he didn't mind the laying of bricks in America. His hands were large and his back was strong and his family had to eat. He consoled himself that this was temporary; he would study their language while he built their cities, he would become one of them and then he would go back to his little delicate scales and powders and to the books. Soon his Mariannina gave birth to another son, a wiry but strong one this time, the image of himself, and they named him John. They saved money and bought a lot and built and finally left

behind Little Italy and its slums. Armando learned English less rapidly than he had hoped, but what he knew served him well. He knew all he needed to know for his job of putting brick on mortar and for his everyday living. The important thing, he told himself, was to build well—for others and for himself—and to sink roots. He joined all the Italian societies and, by the time the depression struck, he was a respected man in the community. His only bridge to the past and Lecce was a small fig tree he had planted in his large back yard. The tree reminded him of home and he was glad of it and it was enough for him. Unlike some oldsters he knew—and even middle-aged men—he did not waste his time romanticizing an empty past. Lecce was a small, dirty, pest-ridden town in the arid wastes of Calabria. The town was built around a crumpling arch that was two thousand years old. That is how he visualized Lecce; old, crumbling, dying. In America he lived in a new house built with his own hands. He smoked Toscanelli cigars, drank strong red wine with Vichy water and played *bocce* in his leisure time. His Mariannina was a lively one in bed, and in the kitchen she was a magician. The first big shock came in 1932 when he almost lost his home. But he weathered that storm and soon helped others in The Block to save their homes. His boys were growing up properly. Like a good father he saw to it that they respected the sting of a razor strop and the learning inside of books. He would see to it that they went to schools of higher learning and not become bricklayers. It dismayed Armando and pained him very deeply when Mussolini took Italy to war against his adopted land, America. He resigned from one of the clubs where he felt too much sympathy was expressed for the Italian dictator. He had a great stake in the war, both his sons were in it, fighting. He lived now

for the small, v-mail letters that came often from both of them. Inevitably his eyes were turned toward Europe again.

At what point in his life does a man say to himself? *I am old*. On the day he received the shocking news that his son, Alfredo, was dead, killed in the Battle of the Bulge, Armando felt he was an old man. The return of the younger one revived him, but not for long. He could not trust himself any more on a high scaffold. He was tired of building. One day he fell down two flights and broke his back. He lay in bed for six months and, when he got up, Armando walked with the aid of a cane.

It was while sitting with his arms folded that old Armando started thinking of the past; of Lecce and its glories, of the sun-soaked plains of Calabria. And he began questioning Johnnie minutely about Italy during the war and he was grateful for what he heard. His son had many things to tell, and old Armando either wasn't perceptive enough or didn't bother noticing that Johnnie's stories became embellished with time, nor did it occur to him that Johnnie might be inventing stories in order not to disappoint him. He never knew that what his son had seen in Italy sickened him; that he had avoided going to the towns whenever possible, because he was never able to stand apart and dissociate himself from the guilt, the shame and prostration of the vanquished land. "Ai, *Madonna*, it's good there!" old Armando would smack his lips. And now there was a strong pull to go back, to walk the ancient cobblestone streets and touch the fine young fig and olive trees, to stand in front of the two-thousand-year-old arch. And in his back yard the fig tree became almost like a shrine, for it was part of Lecce, having come from there, accompanied by a sack of native earth. He

worshipped the tree and spoke Italian to it as if it were the only language it understood. He pruned it lovingly in the spring, dug carefully not to hurt its roots and sat under it for hours on end contemplating its sturdy limbs, the deep green of the leaves and the ripe brown fruit. In the winter he covered it with burlap sacking and put boards around it to shelter the tree from the harsh winds.

At what point does a man start thinking of death? Armando Constable started thinking of death after that evening with his old friend, Dominic Sciortino. On that night when Dominic had walked out, he felt as if the world walked out with him. It required more strength, more energy, a greater desire to live than Armando possessed in his tired old age to stand alone and apart from the cold world, to fight an unseen and yet implacable enemy who was nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Armando didn't think of it as death, but rather as a long sleep. It occurred to him that if he could dissolve in this long sleep, he would get even with the world that abandoned him.

He heard his son come in the room and turned to face him.

"How do you feel, Pa?" Johnnie asked with concern, sitting down.

The old man nodded. "Fine," he muttered.

"Maybe we ought to try a doctor," Johnnie suggested. He thought his father looked thinner and more wasted now than after the accident with the scaffold. But then there had been a tangible thing, a busted back. What was the malady now? Johnnie wondered.

The old man rolled his head on the pillow. "Even if you could get a doctor to come up here," he said almost in a whisper, "it wouldn't help. I don't have the kind of pain a doctor can help."

"How do you *know*?" Johnnie insisted.

"I know, John. It doesn't hurt. Nothing really hurts. It's just that I feel so tired. But don't worry, I'll be up on my feet again soon." He sighed and looked at his large hands and the calluses that were growing soft with disuse. "Where's Mama?" he asked after a brief pause.

"In the kitchen."

"Did she see Peggy this morning?"

Johnnie nodded. "She got her room back," he said, "and feels fine. But I'd rest much easier if she left town altogether for a while."

The old man sighed again and his eyes wandered to the ceiling. It needed painting. "They're making a big fuss downstairs," he said, "getting ready for St. Rocco's Day."

"Yeah, I saw," Johnnie said. "Only this year they're doing up brown . . . have a platform and everything."

"A platform?" the old man said, mildly interested.

"Sure! A reviewing stand. And it's going up across the way on the lot. We'll have a ringside seat. Maybe they'll even invite us to sit on the reviewing stand as honored guests. You ought to polish up the medal from the Mazzini Society and wear the Silver Star the army gave you for Al's trouble. I'll put on *my* hardware. It ought to draw an audience."

"I wish they would go elsewhere with their games," the old man said, motioning weakly with his hand. His ear caught the sound of hammering and he listened to it attentively as if it stirred some echo in him. His eyes brightened as if a small, brief fire were lit in them. "You were two years old when you marched in your first St. Rocco's Day parade," he said. "I carried you on my shoulder. You were so excited by the music you wet your pants, and I had to finish the parade in my undershirt. I was very em-

barrassed, but Mama laughed so much she almost split her sides. Mama, she laughed all the time as if somebody was tickling her. She made more noise than the music."

Johnnie got up and switched on the light. He was conscious that beyond the shade-drawn and boarded-up windows the evening was in full bloom. He thought of his wife and wondered where she was at this very moment and what she was doing. Was she safe, hanging around in the city? A wild longing to run to her and be with her was inside him like a caged bird. His fists were aching to smash everything in sight; to tear the webs and run, run to her . . . before it was too late.

"Johnnie—"

"What is it, Pa?"

"Those stories you used to tell me about Lecce and the old country, were they true?"

"What do you mean?" Johnnie asked, puzzled.

"Were things really good there like you said?"

"Sure, perfect," Johnnie replied eagerly, trying to humor the old man. "A hell of a swell place, Italy. You lie under a tree and an olive comes popping in."

"I don't mean that," Mr. Constable interrupted. "I mean the stories you told me about the *people*, the *festas*, the singing in the streets, the good wines, the friendliness . . . I mean—the good life—"

"Oh, sure, Pa."

"No, it's not true." His head was shaking violently on the pillow. "You made up the stories to please me."

"What makes you say that?"

"You told me what I wanted to hear. You saw it made me happy. You saw I needed something to hang on to—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Johnnie protested.

"I believed it then," the old man said as if talking to himself, "because I needed to believe it. I had to have something to hang on to. Now it isn't necessary any more." He turned his face toward the wall. "But I'm grateful to you anyway."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

JOHNNIE CLUNG TO THE GAPS in the boards for hours, watching the feverish activity below. He counted all the bulbs in sight and speculated on the number of nails used in putting together the reviewing stand. The activity going on in the street fascinated him. Somehow he felt what was happening there concerned him too. He became obsessed with the notion, as the feast day came nearer, that they were building a bridge for him, an avenue of escape. He thought he saw them gaze up at his hideout on the second floor and there were meaningful smiles on their lips. The smiles—he was sure they were smiles and not something he only imagined—were like a secret code. He thought desperately: "They'll help me! They'll help me!" He saw them in his mind's eye, marching up the stairs and offering to take him out of here and escort him to the rooming house where his wife sat waiting for him and then lead both of them to some mysterious train that would whisk them to safety.

He had not heard from Peggy in a week. He suspected the mailbox downstairs was being pilfered, but he wasn't sure. He felt cut off from Peggy as completely as he was cut off from the rest of the world. He stood for hours watching the street as if he expected Peggy to appear, wave to him and tell him what he was eager to hear: that she was well. He longed to see her but the thought that she

might venture into the neighborhood by herself terrified him. His father seldom got up from bed. His mother puttered in the kitchen though there was little to eat. They ate only when one of the more courageous neighbors left some food at night on their back porch. There were never any notes accompanying the food, though he always searched for them. His only contact with the outside was the radio which never mentioned the things he had to know. He had to know what was finally happening to the reward money, although there too he had given up hope. Had Minelli broken out of jail again or was he being brought to trial? Did people outside still remember him, Johnnie Constable, about whom so much had been written not so very long ago? He wanted desperately to believe that there was at least one person on the outside, besides Peggy, who thought about him.

Johnnie walked away from the living-room window, went to his room and sat down on the bed. The worst part of it was that even at this late date he could not be certain that the whole thing was *real*. How was one to determine whether or not this whole thing was a diabolical game? It might very well be. It seemed incredible, each time he considered it, that Minelli's henchmen on the outside would resort to murder while their leader was in jail. Minelli would be a dead duck. Didn't *he* know it? Godammit, didn't Minelli know it? And if it wasn't Minelli's gang, who else could it be? Who else would attempt to kill a shoe salesman? Did the reward money have anything to do with it?

He slapped his brow savagely and rose. If it *was* Minelli's gang, why didn't the authorities do something about it? Was it really a fact that they had no proof and no clues? He had gone over this tortured ground a thousand times

and it led nowhere. "You've got to get out of here!" he intoned to himself. He was certain about this one thing: he had to get out. The break had to come—soon. He didn't see any other way. He didn't consider his plan of escape as a bold gesture, but rather as an act of liberation; it would free him from the chains of this prison and relieve his parents who were suffering on account of him. It occurred to him that if he were single and had no attachments, he would have attempted the break a long time ago. But there was Peggy—and Peggy was pregnant. And about this too he had ambivalent feelings. If she were not pregnant he would be less concerned about the consequences; on the other hand, if anything happened to him, there was the consolation and the assurance of continuity.

He reached for the pistol and regarded it thoughtfully. He found a measure of solace gripping the weapon, contemplating its black, deadly solidity. He took it apart—this he learned in the army—oiled the parts, dried them with a damp cloth and reassembled the weapon. He did this each morning, ritually, as if in this act he were establishing some sort of inevitability. He did not need the kitchen calendar to inform him when Rocco, the patron saint of all Italians, would have his praises sung to him. There was an inevitability about that too. Down in the street the reviewing stand was ready, the lights strung up and lit, the bunting hung on the lamp posts. He knew that The Block was now ready for St. Rocco . . . to pay homage and celebrate his name. The only doubt in his mind was whether The Block was ready for Johnnie Constable.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE SUN ROSE EARLY, climbed swiftly to its uppermost perch and beamed pleasantly on the world below. It was a cool, beautiful day and the soft breezes played gently with the bunting on the speakers' platform and the lamp posts on The Block. The children were out early, the girls dressed in pink and yellow, and the boys in navy blue. They played in the middle of the street, the traffic having been rerouted for this one day. The parade would not begin until late in the afternoon, but already there was a feeling of festive expectancy in the neighborhood as real and tangible as the smell of rich sauces before supper.

Johnnie took his time about shaving. He saw the look of surprise on his mother's face when he came out of his room wearing a clean white shirt and creased trousers. But then he noticed that she too was dressed as if for some festive occasion, wearing her one good black dress. Mr. Constable remained stubbornly in bed until he heard the first strains of the band. Then he suddenly leaped out of bed and asked to be led to a place where he might see what was going on. All three arrayed themselves near the boarded-up living-room window and looked down through the narrow gaps in the boards.

"There they go!" the old man said eagerly as the oldsters from the Italian Social and Athletic Club came marching down The Block, heading toward the clearing around the

reviewing stand. He recognized Sciortino, Genovese, Marinelli, Narducci and the others. He reeled off their names one by one as if calling the roll. He noted that they did not bother keeping time to the band music and for some reason felt annoyed over it. A few of them were slouching, he noticed, some shuffling, some depending on canes. "*Madonna!*" he muttered, displeased, what sort of a parade was this? In former years, when he had participated, everybody was spruce and lively. He was convinced that they missed him.

Mama Constable watched in silence, her eyes straining to catch the shapes of the colorfully dressed children as if she was searching for one particular child. Not so very long ago she had marched with her own two small ones dressed in little sailor suits. At least, it didn't seem so long ago. What pleasure, she thought, it would give one to see a grandson among these laughing children. Their faces brought to mind a favorite image: of Italy, of spring and a field of blooming pansies.

Johnnie saw the *bocce* brigade march by, followed by the younger and jauntier members of the Garibaldi lodges, Little Italy clubs and Sons of St. Rocco. Each one of these columns was preceded by loud bands with rolling drums and brassy cymbals. The thunderous noise of the music crashed into the tomblike living room, routing the deathlike silence that had accumulated since the trouble began. To Johnnie this noise was like an invisible hand reaching out to grasp his own. He was imbued by a wild, irrational hope that at any moment the marchers would break ranks, storm the house and liberate them all. It would take no effort at all, he reasoned, for there were so many of them, friends like Larry and Cosmo, acquaintances, former schoolmates, fellow-members of clubs. In this one act they

would vindicate themselves in his eyes and restore his faith in them. He pressed his body against the boards and watched their faces as they marched by the house. He heard himself cursing mildly, perturbed by the fact that the marchers in the first column did not even take the trouble to look in his direction. It occurred to him that these older men had deliberately turned away their faces as if they were determined to avoid looking at the ugly boards. The anger against them was a brief thing; one could not expect much from the old men. If there were any fireworks, he thought, they would come from the others, the columns where men his own age marched. He caught sight of them now swinging down The Block. He could hear their easy banter, saw their flashing teeth, could almost touch them. His heart beat violently and he pressed his lips together to keep from calling to them. He noticed one or two faces turning curiously in his direction, but the column did not stop. Not one of the columns stopped in front of the house. They hurried by as if they were anxious to leave it behind, to forget about it.

And now his jaws were clamped tightly together for it required some effort on his part to keep from shouting. Each new column renewed his waning small hope. When the last one marched by, he stared at it uncomprehendingly as if he had been spat upon and betrayed. He saw them now, grouping around the speakers' platform where a thin metal loudspeaker shone with the last rays of the sun. All the seats on the platform were filled and he recognized Mike Fortugno, Antonino, Mollinari—although he had moved out of The Block—Luca, and several others. He caught sight of Dominic Sciortino who mounted the platform, changed his mind and descended. "Now—" Johnnie thought desperately. The crowd was thickly massed around

the platform. "Now—" The speeches would start soon and Johnnie speculated on which one of the speakers would be the first to mention his name. They could not avoid mentioning it. Hadn't *he* freed them of the black plague of Minelli? Wasn't *he* their Johnnie, their "boy with the silver knee"? Wasn't *he* the one who made Parsons Street famous and put The Block on the map?

He nudged his father as Mike Fortugno took the rostrum to greet the assembled in the name of The Block. Mike was facing the house as he spoke. Johnnie heard the barber say something about what pride they took in their block and its achievements as part of the community, adding to the good name of all Italians who helped one another in sickness and in health. Johnnie glanced at his father out of the corner of his eye as if alerting him to the fact that Mike Fortugno would talk about him, Armando Constable, who was, after all, the founder of The Block. But the barber finished his speech abruptly and sat down. Others got up to speak, representatives of the various clubs and societies, prominent citizens of the Italian community, and a Mr. Tirano who represented the mayor. Johnnie hung on to each word boomed by the loudspeaker. It required only two words to awaken the huge crowd to the fact that he was across the street; it required only the mention of his name. "Maybe the next speaker—" he thought desperately.

He realized that there weren't many more speakers. Time was running short, his time, that is, and he heard himself muttering insanely, articulating his own name as if he were prompting the speakers. Involuntarily his right hand reached down to his trouser pocket where he felt the heaviness of the pistol. Their words were beginning to lose all semblance of meaning to him. He thought he saw Hugo Minelli's father, an old, round-shouldered man, sit-

ting in the rear of the platform. The old man wore a white carnation in his lapel. "*Madonna!*" Johnnie heard himself scream. He thought he heard his parents questioning him, but he paid no attention to their words. The sight of old Minelli was like a treacherous stab. The speeches came to an abrupt end. He glared at the microphone as if measuring its distance, as if trying to determine whether he could reach for it and seize it and set it afire with words of rage. He felt himself moving away from the window as if that too were part of the treachery. Momentarily he stood in the middle of the room as if trying to make up his mind what there was for him to do. His mind was a crazyquilt of incoherent thoughts. He was startled by a new blast of music that seemed to come from underneath the windows. The dancing had started in the street. He heard the dance music, the shouting and the happy laughter. In the next instant he plunged for the door, tore at it violently and ran down the hallway stairs. He heard his parents shouting after him and turned once, at the bottom of the stairs, waving frantically at his mother, motioning her back into the house. Outside, he hesitated for an instant, trembled, and touched the iron railing for support. He felt a momentary dizziness; it appeared as if he were no longer accustomed to the open air and the limitless space stretching before him. He thought he saw astonished faces turn in his direction, but he wasn't certain. The faces in the crowd did not interest him. He wanted only to make his way through the mass of people, reach the end of The Block, hail a taxi or board a bus, then get lost in the merciful, vast darkness of the city, until it was safe for both of them, himself and his wife, to run away . . . run away . . . anywhere.

He plunged into the dense, swaying crowd that had a certain volatility and yet appeared like a wall. He started

pushing his way through this wall. Though he was in a desperate hurry, Johnnie realized that he should move cautiously, slowly, remain unobtrusive, if possible, arouse as little attention as possible. His eyes darted suspiciously over what appeared to him like thousands of faces, some familiar, some strange. Each face was a potential threat. He imagined himself alone on a battlefield on which a vast enemy was arrayed. The enemy pressed in on him, giving him little or no room for maneuvering, pinning his arms at his sides whereas he needed freedom to act. He heard his name uttered with shocked surprise and he appeared just as surprised to hear it for he was in a world full of strangers. He didn't bother turning; he didn't acknowledge their greetings. His head was moving in all directions like a nervous, quivering weathervane, and his eyes were alert to an arm raised surreptitiously or a hostile face. His right hand was clutching the gun in his pocket. Dancing couples bumped into him and he was displeased at the slow progress he was making. Fortunately the music was like a loud, protective cover that drowned out the exclamations of those who had recognized him and uttered his name. He felt a hand on his shoulder, turned quickly, glared at the man's face, recognized an old acquaintance, stared icily in return and continued on his way. He had covered half of the block, walking in a crouch, his body tense, his head bent as if he were conscious of his height and tried his best to shrink. The palm of his right hand was moist against the metal of the pistol. He was conscious of pushing more forcefully now, hoping to cover the rest of the block before the music stopped. Suddenly he caught sight of Peggy who was several feet away, her arms in front of her, shielding her belly. He raised his arm to draw her attention, dropped it quickly for fear of drawing un-

necessary attention, and started toward her. Their eyes met and she smiled at him, and his arms reached out as if to touch her. The crowd separating them was a thick, solid though moving wall that refused to give way despite his lunges. "Peg—gy—" He felt a sharp, hot stab in the small of his back. He felt his eyes cloud and his knees turn to water. He heard the music from a distance, then he thought the music had stopped altogether and the feast had come to an end. In place of the music there was a wild, panicky screaming. He was sure they were screaming, rending his ears with their screaming, and the men were shouting his name—Johnnie Constable—they got Johnnie . . . furiously now, hysterically, rending the air with their bellowing like a thousand outraged bulls. He thought he saw Peggy bending over him, clutching and shaking him, and from a distance he saw his mother's tragic face moving disembodied toward him. Then he lost her, and his eyes, dimming rapidly as if heavy shutters were moving over them, roamed over the many guilty faces looking down upon him. He thought he saw their lips moving, and their blurred faces appeared as if they were asking his forgiveness. He moved then, moved once more and for the last time as if trying to find a more comfortable place for his body which was lying in a pool of blood trickling from the hole in the flesh where he had been stabbed. And then, he thought, the world had plunged into a massive silence.

Ai, Madonna. It was over.

Cleph,

At 11

I don't know why you
wanted me to think you were
dead. I don't know why you
were trying to find out if I would
be married or even cared. Well as
you see, I was. All I have
left to say is I found out you
do love me. That all I want. If
you didn't mean what you
said, don't come after me. But
if you do, call me, then I will
come — anything you want to
say to me, or you to me.
If you want to sign a "letter"
it's all right. I'll be glad to
get you there, you know I will.
I'll be glad to hear from you.



"A ROUGH,
RUGGED
NAKED
BOOK..."



—That's what reviewers said when Louis Falstein's first novel, *Face of a Hero*, shocked a half million readers with its brutal earthiness. Now Mr. Falstein is back, turning all his great natural powers to a new story — *written exclusively for Lion Books* — the story of a man and his woman, wrapped tight in the strangling hungers of a big city.

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Slaughter Street is big city life, its every pulse and passion.